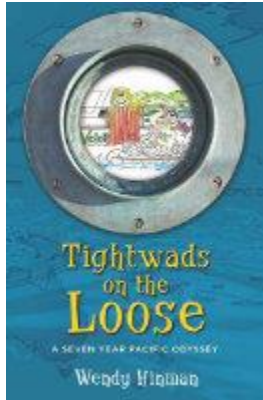


Excerpt from *Tightwads on the Loose* by Wendy Hinman

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Kanmon Kaikyo, Japan

The shortest route from Western Kyushu into the Inland Sea we knew would involve some challenging sailing. Indeed it did.

Our route took us through Kanmon Kaikyo, a narrow nine-mile-long cut between the islands of Kyushu and Honshu with heavy shipping traffic and currents as strong as thirteen knots. Adverse winds kept us anchored outside the channel for days in the shadow of gigantic oil tanks and acre-sized warehouses, as well as smaller ships—one hundred times our size—who were also waiting to pass through. This grim industrial area had been the original target for the bomb that had ultimately devastated Nagasaki. The time on our three-month visas remained ever-present in our minds as we entertained ourselves with books and card games during two days of rain, gusty winds, and then thick fog. Gradually the wind clocked around to the west with an ideal wind speed of seven to ten knots.

While we waited, we checked and rechecked the currents and tides, acutely aware how critical timing would be. Our engine wasn't strong enough to counter an adverse current of even three knots—and certainly not the thirteen that we could encounter if we got it wrong. We aimed to arrive at the narrowest point under the bridge during slack water just before the flood so that we'd be gently flushed in the direction of our destination. Starting early against the last of the ebb gave us extra time to pass through while the current was mild enough to maintain control.

We were nervous about navigating this busy shipping channel with so little confidence in our engine. But if we didn't cut between Kyushu and Honshu, we'd have to sail hundreds of miles around the bottom of Kyushu. I might be exaggerating a bit to say that'd be like sailing around Cape Horn because you're afraid your engine might quit while going through the Panama Canal, but to me, the analogy seemed appropriate, especially given

such a short sailing season. Our decision to visit Nagasaki and the western islands put us in this position with little time left. In hindsight, it might have been faster to sail around. But it is an experience we'll never forget. Perhaps, neither will the Japanese coast guard.

At what we calculated would be the tail end of the ebb, we up-anchored and motored eastward into the narrow channel. With a light breeze on my face, I strained to read an oversized reader board which indicated the current under the bridge seven miles away. I could make out a 3W.

"Looks like it says three knots from the west," I announced.

"That seems about right," Garth said from where he stood, tiller in hand. That meant the current was flowing in a westerly direction at a speed of three knots against us. The next current reader board showed, 2W, which meant the current was dropping. We expected the adverse current to keep declining until slack water, when it would shift in our favor and give us a gentle boost.

We had ideal conditions for sailing in a narrow band just outside the shipping lanes and made steady progress the first few miles. Ship after ship passed, heading the opposite direction. As we rounded a curve in the channel, wind funneled down the narrow slot directly from our destination. With little room between the shipping lane and the shore to sail against the wind, we fired up the engine. For several minutes we motor-sailed up the slim channel, marveling at the steady stream of car carriers, oil tankers, and container ships flagged from around the world.

Then the engine made a ghastly grinding sound of metal-against-metal. I rushed below to shut it off before we wrecked it. I looked at Garth. He shook his head and a look of disgust crossed his face. "I spend so much time fiddling with that damn engine, and when we really need it, we can't count on it." He blew out a stream of air. "So honey, you ready to short-tack along the shore?" We'd have to tack back and forth against the wind in the twenty-five-yard slot between the channel markers and shore.

"You think we can pull this off?" I asked nervously, noting how incredibly narrow it was outside the shipping channel. We'd be tacking every two minutes until we got to the bridge, which could take us an hour. Every tack had to be perfect. If not, we risked losing ground, hitting a rock near shore or wandering into the path of a hard metal ship.

"Do we have a choice?" he said. The current changed directions. Turning around would have us sailing into an adverse current. Continuing would let the current help push us through the passage. If we took too long, the current could rise to levels that might be impossible to steer. We could get caught in a whirlpool, spin out of control and careen into a ship. A steady stream of ships passed nearly nose to stern. None would be able to maneuver around a sailboat. At this point we were racing for our lives and our home. No, we didn't have a choice.

"Let's tack," Garth said. I wrapped the jib line around the winch, put the winch handle into position, and braced my legs. "Tacking." Garth pushed the tiller over hard. I pulled in the line as fast as I could. I handed him the line and winched in the last bit. It was a good

tack. He pulled up the traveler so he could point the boat as high into the wind as possible. We'd done this before when we were racing and dueling with another boat for position. I thought of all the times we'd challenged ourselves to sail in the fluky winds in the narrow channel under the Agate Pass Bridge back in Puget Sound or the time we ran out of gas under the Montlake Bridge and had to tack our way through "the Cut," a channel no wider than a hundred feet. At that moment, I was grateful for our practiced teamwork. This time the consequences of screwing up were far more dire. I felt the adrenaline kick into high gear. I readied the winch for the next tack, which came only a minute later.

"Ready? Tacking," Garth said. We repeated our maneuver again and again. Over the years we'd worked out a system that was paying dividends now when we needed to be on top of our game. Garth steered as high as he could, feathering as much as possible to reduce the number of tacks we'd ultimately have to make and get us through this narrow death trap before the current became unmanageable.

With only a third of the channel left to navigate, a Japanese Coast Guard vessel motored into our path and stopped directly in front of us. Perhaps the officers expected us to stop, but there was no way we could. Garth kept steering straight toward them. I hoped they'd get out of the way before we got there.

"Perhaps they don't realize that we're going to get swept up this channel no matter what we do," Garth said. "I'd prefer to do it under control." There was nowhere safe to anchor. Turning around with the tide against us would have been impossible. Perhaps no one expected a sailboat would attempt to sail through here nowadays. But what choice did we have at this point?

It felt like a game of chicken. Finally the vessel shifted to our side as we kept sailing. Several uniformed officers appeared on deck. Over a megaphone, one officer announced, "You must take down your sail."

Garth yelled over the wind, "We have to sail. We have no engine."

The man repeated, "You must take down your sail."

Garth again yelled, "We must sail. We have no engine."

Then the man asked, "What is your destination?"

I was dumbfounded. What made him think he'd hear our replies when he was using a megaphone? Garth pointed at the bridge. I held up the radio microphone to suggest they call us by radio. A minute passed and we tacked while they looked on. After we settled onto the new tack, I called them on the VHF and explained that our engine had quit and we'd soon be through the channel anyway.

"Please be very careful," a voice replied tentatively.

"We'll stay outside the shipping lanes," I said. I hoped. The channel was getting narrower. We continued to make steady progress toward the bridge at the top end of the channel.

Velella neared the narrowest section under the bridge where there was no room outside the hundred-yard-wide shipping channel. Three ships approached in a steady line. They

loomed over us, casting a long shadow. Bridge supports took some of our sea room, so under the bridge we would have to venture into the channel. We tacked toward the line of ships into a wall of standing waves. Just then we got another call on the VHF. Could they have picked a worse time?

After we tacked back and they'd called a third time, I finally answered. A baritone voice asked me to spell our vessel name, state our port of entry into Japan and nationality. It was as though we were starting all over again. How could they be so oblivious?

The voice asked, "Please state your last port."

"Fukuoka," I said breathlessly as I prepared the winch for the next tack.

The voice asked, "Please state your destination." I felt my blood pressure rising.

"Shikoku. Stand by," I said, putting down the microphone to tack. I pulled in the sheet as the jib came across the bow. I winched in the last bit, and then wound line around the opposite winch to prepare for the next tack.

Garth pulled up the traveler. I resumed microphone-duty.

"This is *Velella*, go ahead," I said into the microphone.

"What is your estimated time of arrival?" the voice asked.

"It depends on the wind. Our engine is not working," I replied.

"How long will it take to repair your engine?" the voice asked.

"I don't know," I said. "We don't yet know what the problem is."

"What will you do if you cannot get your engine working?" he asked.

"We are a sailboat. Sail to America, I guess."

"Sail to America! Sail to America?" the voice said, rising several octaves. The microphone clicked off, and I imagined stunned looks and chatter among the officers listening.

Garth chuckled.

"Yes, sail to America," I said. "Stand by." I set down the microphone again as we maneuvered the boat through another tack.

When I came back on the radio, he asked, "How many people do you have onboard?"

"Two."

"Two?" the surprised voice repeated. "Two. Ah so, desuka." Finally they understood. There were two people on board doing all the sail-maneuvering through a narrow channel filled with large ships, and one of them was the woman they were interrogating. I wondered whether they could see the predicament we were in. After a silence, he came back on the radio. "Please contact customs when you arrive in Shikoku." He signed off just before we darted across the channel between two fast moving ships a thousand times our tonnage.

My heart thudded a staccato beat as we slipped between them.

When we passed under the bridge, the reader board indicated the current was flowing east at four knots. Garth steered past the channel marker and resumed a position on the shoulder of this busy thoroughfare.

"That enough excitement for ya?" Garth said, face flushed. "You can't say we live a

dull life.” I nodded vigorously.

Within a half hour, we heard an announcement on the VHF in English that the current under the bridge was eight knots and rising and that passage would be closed to all vessels unable to power more than fifteen knots.