

## COMMENTARY

MY TURN CHARLES PINNING

## 'J&amp;J' lit up Independence Day in 1963

**G**OR-geous day!" Kiki's mother gushed several times before lighting a sparkler: "It is possible that J&J could stop by for drinks later on. Nothing definite."

Kiki and my brother smiled at each other and I looked up at the sails and then to the puffy clouds going by in the sky. I didn't know who "J&J" were. But, somehow, this comment charged the atmosphere.

My brother had drilled me in the etiquette of yachting society, lest I embarrass him in front of his girlfriend and her parents: "Keep your mouth shut and you'll be OK." So I did.

I was here to mix in with Kiki's brother, who was my age, but he had suffered a broken leg at summer camp the day before and didn't make it. Still, she and her parents insisted that I come.

That's how an 11-year-old Little League pitcher found himself sailing on Narragansett Bay aboard the elegant Arabella on July 4, 1963.

At the approach of evening, we returned to the harbor and moored. The plan was to have dinner aboard and then watch the fireworks to be launched from Kings Park.

As food was being set out, a white dinghy with a small outboard motor pulled up alongside. A tomboyish girl about my age, tanned and freckled, her dark hair cut in a pageboy, tossed a rope to me.

"Wrap it around the cleat," she said.

She was cute.

"That thing, on the gunnel," she said, pointing to a bracket screwed to the top edge of the boat. I wrapped the rope around a few times, then she extended her hand and I helped her aboard.

"Susan," she said, smiling. "And

you are?"

"Chuck," I said.

"Where's Richie?"

"He broke his leg at camp."

"That's tough luck," said Susan.

"Well, I am very glad to meet you."

Kiki and her father and mother rushed over to Susan and engulfed her in hugs and kisses. After the hubbub died down, Susan said to me, "You wanna buzz around?"

Susan deftly wove her way through the boats in the harbor and broke free, heading toward a setting sun that split open like a big orange, pouring its iridescent juice over the surface of Narragansett Bay. We followed the curving coastline just out of sight of the harbor, then cut in toward a long wooden pier.

At the end of the pier was a man in a black suit, sitting on a canvas folding chair and smoking a cigarette. He examined us flinty-eyed before flicking the cigarette into the water.

The sprawling Mediterranean-style house sat atop a hill and a party was going on outside. Susan's mother called her over.

In the dinghy, I'd told Susan about my Little League exploits. She introduced me as, "Chuck, the baseball player." Her mother smiled and said, "Well, then."

We were served glasses of a lemony punch and then went into the house, up red-carpeted stairs into a bedroom. We looked out the French windows, where we could see all of Newport in the distance and the harbor.

It was getting dark. I looked down on the party and saw President John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline. Oh, I suddenly realized — *this* is who "J&J" were. My brother had once mentioned that Kiki's parents were friends with the Kennedys.

Boom! Boom! The fireworks display began. From the upstairs

window, we had a long view, a panorama. Then there was the finale, and I looked down at the president of the United States and his wife. Like everyone else, they were smiling and oohing and aahing.

It was very dark now. I was taken back to the Arabella in a launch with a light on the bow, an American flag flapping off the stern. Susan told me she lived in Greenwich, Connecticut. I found out later she was related to Robert Kennedy's wife.

I climbed aboard and waved goodbye to her.

Everyone asked where I'd been. I told them that I'd been over to Hammersmith Farm.

"Did you ...?"

"Yes," I said. "I did." And a reverence came over the boat that felt like church.

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence.