

Lazarusfish

by WAYNE CRESSER

When the ceaseless gusts and consequent swells finally made him sick, and then sicker, he nearly tumbled to the spot where he heaved over the side of the boat. He wished to throw himself in after, he felt so disappointed in himself.

If it was going to end this way, he thought, he needn't have worked so hard to tamp down the nausea, the assault of bad tastes rising to the back of his throat. He needn't have taken the occasional timeouts from fishing, causing Jimmy, his friend and the captain of the boat, to ask what was up? Was he alright? Was he hungover? Didn't he know better?

He tried to assuage Jimmy's concern by referring to a stomach problem, a congenital thing that hadn't bothered him until recently, instead of admitting that the six-foot swells and gusts blowing out of the east were the causes of his discomfort.

On top of that, trying to balance himself with a line in the water and the boat constantly rocking had dampened his attitude. Fishing this way was like praying drunk. He began to fear that under these circumstances, he'd catch nothing.

Still, he tried to sound brave. His face would have said otherwise, but he and Jimmy were positioned on opposite sides of the boat, back facing back. They couldn't see each other's faces unless they turned to talk.

And ordinarily, their chatter would be lively. They'd talk about movies, music, and baseball. Especially baseball. Never relationships. Never work. Invariably, they'd get around to mentioning their appreciation for being out there, fishing for tautog in the open waters just beyond Beavertail Light. The pleasures of a bright Sunday morning in early November.

On this morning, however, the talk had been minimal, and he felt he must say something to let the captain know he was still in the game.

He would grunt now and then, as if making a real effort to reel in his line. From time to time, he'd say, "Damn, I thought I had one there."

"There's fish here," said Jimmy, who held to an obstinate optimism where fish were concerned, "I'm getting interest but they're just not committing to the bait. This turbulence probably isn't helping much."

You said a mouthful, he thought.

His line sat on top of rocks piled at the bottom of the sea, where the tautog were. Suddenly, for it is always suddenly, he felt a tug and saw the tip of his rod bend toward the water. He pulled up slightly and jerked the line. Then he could feel it for certain, a fish on and tugging. He let out some line and then reeled it back. He tried to work it that way, reeling down and pulling up, but then the line grew taut, and he could pull no more.

The sudden movement and excitement had shaken him to the core. Something tectonic inside, a massive shifting leading to a minor upheaval. He dropped the rod, and with a stumbling will, managed somehow to reach the lee side of the boat. There he let it fly, once, and then again.

"You okay over there?" Jimmy asked without turning to look at him.

He raised a hand, "A minute," he said.

"You know, I can take us back in if you want."

"No, that's okay. I'll be all right."

Turning toward him now, Jimmy pointed to the rod on the cockpit floor, the handle of which was knocking against the side of a cooler.

"Right," he said, picking it up and reeling the slack line in. As he reached the other side of the boat, he discovered he could not longer take in line.

"I'm afraid I'm caught up in the rocks now."

Jimmy put his rod in its holder and crossed over. Quickly they went to work, trying to free the line and save the tackle and setup.

He released a little line. It slackened on the rod and Jimmy, leaning over the side of the boat, pulled the slack end through the rod tip. He held the loose tackle in his hands which were spread apart, roughly the length of a football. Then he tugged the end closer to the water, just slightly. The line cooperated.

"I'm letting go," he said. "You can start reeling in now."

He followed the captain's instruction mechanically at first, still trying to establish equilibrium on his rubbery legs and dredging up shards of bad taste from the back of his throat and mouth, spitting it all over the side.

As he reeled in, he could feel a drag on the line. It was getting heavier as it moved closer. He felt very tired, and everything seemed to require more than the usual effort. He thought it was just fatigue until the end of his line came within 5 or 6 feet of the surface. Reflexively, he looked down, scanning the water for the shimmer of hook and sinker coming up. The sea was remarkably clear and for the moment, still. Then he made out the shape of a fish. A few more turns and he could see it, a tautog about a foot and a half long.

He was elated that he'd caught something he might keep, and relieved when there appeared to be no fight left in the fish.

He leaned over the side of the boat and reached for the line, grabbing it a foot or two above the fish, which was well out of the water now. Just then, as if waking from a stupor, the fish heaved, in jerky, muscular spasms.

Jimmy noticed him struggling with the fish. "You will lose him that way. Let go of the line and grab the leader if you can."

He lifted his hand and moved it over the main line and past the swivel and sinker to the top of the heavier line, at the end of which churned the revived fish. He yanked the leader toward him and pulled the fish and himself to the floor of the boat.

Sitting now, he took a moment to examine his catch. He scanned its length and noted a row of baby-like teeth just above the bulbous lower lip, the hook protruding from it.

Swiftly, he picked up a rag and grabbed a pair of pliers from his tackle box. After wrapping the rag around his fingers, he clamped the body of the fish with one hand and used the pliers to remove the hook with the other. He'd been sick and tired, but holding the fish enlivened him. He'd caught a second wind.

Scuttling on his knees now, he crossed to the other side of the boat and dropped the fish into a bucket of water. He knew what he had to do next.

The captain had placed a long knife within reach of the bucket, and in one motion, he grabbed it and stuck the fish, just below the gill. When only a bit of blood trickled from the wound, he knew he'd missed the artery and would have to stick it again to bleed it right. He felt bad about that and took his time on the second go.

When he was finished, he felt invigorated, not entirely steady on his feet, but reenergized.

"Jimmy," he said, "What do you say we sit down and have ourselves some lunch? I'm starving suddenly."

The captain chuckled, "Well, look at you. You were as pale as parchment not more than twenty minutes ago."

"Well, what do you say? Eat?"

"Nah," he said, "the wind has leveled out some since we anchored, and the tide is changing. It's a good time to keep fishing. Bait up and let's stay at it."

Then he added, "We can eat when we get back inside the bay, much more conducive. "

The captain was right, of course.

What did he know anyway? Maybe he'd been plain lucky, catching that fish just when his spirit and the day seemed to be flatlining. He felt humbled by it suddenly, the energy he'd grabbed from that exchange.

He turned to the bait table, where a big pile of green crabs wriggled, some scuttling towards one end of the table and some towards the other. He knocked a large one back to the pile with the side of his knife. Then he started chopping.

