

CLEAR SAILING

By Lorenzo Caricchio

Wrapped like a mummy in damp swaddling, clammy windings restricting me to hesitant, fumbling movements, the murky shroud limited my vision to the very large and the very near, this fog was squeezing the life out of me.

For days now, the islands that define the Maine coastline had appeared from, and then vanished into the gray sameness, like passing thoughts or lost opportunities. When the misty vagueness first appeared it was pleasant, numbing, like a familiar routine; protective like a steady job, it dulled the sharp edges of the world and muffled the noises of the surrounding wildlife. But now the gray fog, like the grayness of time that had crept through my hair and beard, threatened to confine me to an ever-shrinking world that would eventually, I feared, have no room in it for me.

I had hoped that this vacation would be more than just scenery and landmarks and too many bourbons after dinner. I wanted it to be different. I didn't know how exactly, just a yearning for things to be realer, for life to have that new car smell again. Maybe that was why I chose to sail the coast of Maine in late September aboard the *J&E Riggin*.

The *Riggin* is an old, ninety foot, Oysterman Schooner built in the 1800's that had been converted to a passenger vessel. Her skipper/owner, at that time was Dave Allen, a man of my age and height and build who's career fit him like a piece of well worn clothing. He had rescued her bones from a shoal where she had run aground and been abandoned, half in and half out of the water, to be torn apart by competing forces of nature. Were there lessons to be learned from her resurrection? Perhaps the lives and dreams of the men who worked her decks and slept in her bunks were absorbed into the aged keel. Perhaps, under full sail, the creaking of her old wooden ribs against the newer planking of her hull would whisper the secrets of life. Perhaps I would never get know these things because of this damn mind numbing, joint aching, and wind stealing fog!

On the third morning at sea, anchored next to an unseen island, I stood on deck in the dank, motionless air that chilled my lungs and thickened my blood. My hands wrapped, for warmth, around a steaming cup of coffee, as I watched the moist, gauze wind itself tighter around the top of the schooner's masts and the tip of her bowsprit. My desire to raise sail and run free smoldered under the wet blanket of fog. Mentally I cursed as I paced the misty deck – "I want to sail damn it! I'm tired of waiting" The heat of my rising anger dispersed some of the chill in the morning air. Then a deep-throated rumble of thunder, like the voice of God, tore through the soggy curtain and interrupted my internal ranting. The weather was about to change.

I set my half empty mug of coffee on the cabin top and rushed below, fumbled into foul weather gear and was back on deck in time to be drafted, along with the other passengers, to help raise the sails. The wind was rising quickly behind the thunder and the fog began to congeal in to a cold, hard rain that slapped our faces and clawed at our eyes, when we glanced aloft as we hauled on the Halyards. When the Mainsail was raised and reefed and the Jib and Staysail were hoisted and set, the *Riggin* slowly swung her bow to face into the gale. It was time to weigh anchor and I was again pressed into service with four of the other passengers. Taking turns, pumping up and down on the iron bars that operated the Windlass, the anchor chain was slowly lifted, one link at a time,

until all one hundred and fifty feet of chain lay on deck and the anchor was catted along the gunwale.

Winded from the last round of pumping, I remained panting over the Windlass as most of the other “draftees” scuttled below, to the warmth and dryness of the main salon. The retreating fog revealed that we were between a number of small islands. The crew said that it would take several short tacks before we could reach open water and settle down to a steady course. The sudden and prolonged physical activity had transformed me. My muscles felt tight from the exertion of raising the anchor and sails. My heart was jumping in my chest. My anger and frustration, the feeling of helplessness, the accumulation of my years, were all blowing away with each gust of the fast approaching squall. I felt ageless on that timeless sea of excitement. So I readily agreed when I was asked, along with another passenger who had remained in the bow, if we would like to help tack the boat toward open water.

The crew barely had time to instruct us in our new duties before we heard the Skippers’ command to tack shouted against the gusting wind. My job was to release the windward Jib sheet when the boat was headed into the wind. Mike, the older and taller of the two deckhands, would then haul in the leeward sheet as the boat turned through the eye of the wind. Tyson, the other crewmember, along with the other passenger were stationed behind us and would perform the same procedure with the Staysail sheets. It seemed simple enough, too simple, I was hoping for more of a challenge. While the Skipper slowly turned the boat I loosened the line and kept a half turn around the belaying pin as instructed. When the sail began to flutter, I undid the half turn but continued to, loosely, hold the line. The jib began to flap wildly and with such force that it tore the line from my hand. The flailing, inch and a half diameter, rope caught me across the bridge of the nose and sent me sprawling on the rain soaked deck. Mike had the Jib sheeted in on the new course before I was able to scramble to my feet.

This process was repeated, with minor variations but similar results, two more times before I learned how and when to release the line. Mike offered very little advice, knowing that the uncontrolled rope would prove to be the best teacher. One more tack, this time properly executed, and the islands were behind us. The squall was full upon us now. The boat heeled hard over and plunged through the waves, occasionally taking water over the bow. The four of us braced ourselves in the bow, ducking the spray and enjoying the ride. Peering forward through the rain we could see the bright morning sunlight streaming down behind the edge of the dark storm clouds and sparkling off the surface of the sea ahead. Tyson, the dark-haired, extroverted deckhand with an impish air about him, began to tease me about my misadventures with the Jib Sheet. Mike joined in the laughter when I responded that considering their names (Mike & Tyson) I should have expected to get a little beat up and that I was grateful that I still had both of my ears.

For the next four days we had perfect sailing weather, breezy, sunny days and calm, starry nights. In an attempt to recapture some of the time I had lost in the fog I took every opportunity that presented itself, to work alongside the crew. Eventually I developed the knack of anticipating when something needed doing and I was at the right place at the right time. After a while, I think the crew even began to expect me to perform certain duties without having to be asked. Toward the end trip, my body, unaccustomed to the repeated physical exertion, began to protest, and when I would try to hide from a particularly unpleasant or strenuous job Mike would find me, and in his quiet

way, he would counter my excuses until I had no choice but to rise to the task or assert my rights as a passenger. Of course, claiming passenger status at this point in the voyage would cost me the, hard earned, respect of these boys who had treated me like a man; and it would have turned the adventure into just another sightseeing tour.

So I would drag my tired old butt over to the bow or stern or amidships and force my untrained, aching muscles to heave on this line or haul on that halyard, or, in the worst case, pump the Windlass. But when the job was done and the trip was over, the old boat and the young crew had given me more than they took. I felt reborn, vigorous, and more alive than ever. I know that those feelings can be attributed to the fresh salt air and exercise, I know that feelings of excitement and euphoria can be purchased for the price of a ticket on a roller coaster, but those are momentary thrills. This heightened sensuality was brought on by a change in sensibility, a mind-altering, glimpse of things around me and in me that were hidden. When your view is no longer obstructed by the fog of mere existence, the course ahead is clear sailing.