

A Tale of the Old Muddy Reef

By Jay Speakman

Like a waterlogged duck the lobster boat bucked through an icy Atlantic chop,
Then wallowed and shook like a fish on a hook as I drove her down into the trough.

It had set in to blow and was threatening snow as I prayed for a little relief.
But there'd be no rest 'til I'd plumbed the depths, alone on the Old Muddy Reef.

It was late in the fall and we'd seen our big hauls but for week upon week they'd diminished.
Then the curtain came down on the Mount Desert grounds and the inshore season was finished.

Most of the boats that fished the Maine coast had given it up for the year,
Leaving every dock and dooryard stacked with piles of lobster gear.

The strategy then for a few of the men who fished from the Cranberry Isles
Was to lengthen out gear at that time of the year and run it off eight or ten miles.

But the weather turns cold and the Northerlies blow in those dubious last days of fall,
And you're lucky to get out one day out of ten, if you do leave the harbor at all.

Now I'll freely admit, I'd been tempted to quit, and tie the boat up until spring,
Though the prospect of going four months without pay was a pretty unsavory thing.

And I had a good boat built of cedar and oak, right in keeping with Downeast tradition.
The BLACKFIN was strong, nearly forty feet long, and well suited for offshore fishing.

So, the last day I'd gone I had taken traps on, and I'd handily loaded her down
With a deckload of gear and a mile of rope, all rigged for the offshore grounds.

I was ready to go when a strong Northwest blow had held the fleet in for a week,
And our only recourse was do gear-work ashore, and try to catch up on our sleep.

But all things must pass and that wintry blast had finally blown itself out.
Then just as I'd feared, a new threat appeared. A low moving up from the south.

It looked like a chance but I'd have to act fast, and with any amount of luck,
Get an early start, take a walk in the park, and be back before it struck.

The ground in the yard was frozen hard as I fetched some wood for the stove.
When I stepped from the shed, the sky overhead presented a sight to behold.

Across the vault like grains of salt, a trillion stars were strewn,
While down the sky like a melon rind, sailed a sliver of waning moon.

And from this I surmised that the morning tide would run hard upon the shoal,
But a new moon tide in overdrive couldn't sway me from my goal.

The spectre of an approaching storm was of little concern to me,
As, scrubbed and fed, I crawled into bed, and set my alarm for three.

Awake again at three A. M., and still not a whisper of breeze.
The spot report from Mount Desert Rock, "Wind calm and sixteen degrees."

But the buoy report from Cashe's Ledge was enough to give me a scare.
With seas of twelve to fifteen feet, it was already smoking out there.

But Cashe's was ninety miles away, maybe even a little bit more,
So Hell-bent and confident I strode on down to the shore.

Without a fret the village slept at a half-past four in the morning.
In the harbor fourteen lobster boats were riding at their moorings.

My dinner bucket tucked under my arm, I crossed the ice-covered float,
then made for the skiff and casting off, I rowed myself out to the boat.

When that Jimmy awoke in a cloud of blue smoke, I felt like a man on a mission.
My objective now lay just a few miles away. I was fierce and right-full of ambition.

Down East I drove past Bunker's Head Cove where herring seek protection.
Its surface now dark and mirror smooth, inviting some deeper reflection.

Then past Marsh Creek, where on the beach, the bones of a schooner lay.
A relic, upon whose mouldering hull, as children we once played.

An hour more, ten miles offshore, on a heading of South by Southeast
I was nearing my goal, a particular shoal, that was known as the Old Muddy Reef.

In an old union suit and my Norwegian boots, I was snug as a mouse in deep flannel.
When I picked up the mike for a radio check, nobody came back on the channel.

I could already tell that a Southeast swell had been building up all night.
And my singular hope as the hour approached, was it wouldn't breeze up at first light.

With my depth-sounder on in the dark before dawn, I made a survey of the piece.
Then ran to the West to begin my set on the edge of the Old Muddy Reef.

By the time I arrived, there was quite a strong tide, and an Easterly starting to blow.
As I came on the scene, the ocean looked mean, with whitecaps beginning to show.

Now to each three pots with sheet-bend knots, eighty fathoms of warp were bent.
And with bait tied in, both herring and brim, into the brine were sent.

Then the going got tough, it was downright rough, when the sounder read thirty-two fathoms.
By the time I went back to unleash the next stack, spray was flying clear over the cabin.

Well, I worked that pile for a good long while, and it seemed to me I was winning.
But wouldn't you know, it had started to snow, and my troubles were only beginning.

I had just stepped aft and was baiting a trap when her bow fell off of the wind.
In the teeth of the gale she buried her rail, nearly sending me in for a swim.

With a hiss the comber came aboard and it swept the washboard clean.
While snow squalls swirled round this nether world, now an ominous shade of green.

I could scarcely believe that I'd been so naive, as to think I could outwit the ocean.
As spray filled the air, the entire affair now seemed a ridiculous notion.

Some six traps in all, wound up in a ball, were now plummeting straight for the bottom.
By a stroke of luck, they were all warped up, or it's likely I couldn't have caught 'em.

Then fathom by fathom the hauler strained to raise that tangled mess,
As I watched my fortune fall and rise on every foaming crest.

I cursed the day and the buckshot spray and I cursed the incessant motion.
And I cursed the wind and I cursed the tide and I even cursed the ocean.

Then I cursed all the knots in that snarl of pots, and every damned inch of rope.
But the only thing I wouldn't curse, I wouldn't curse my boat.

'Cause a fisherman knows when an ill wind blows, and turns the sea to foam.
When the weather looks grim and it's time to go in, she's the one who'll be taking him home.

Procrastination can have its rewards and right then, I was wishing I'd waited,
Though next I discerned, that the tide now had turned, and even the snow had abated.

Well, I got my legion all strung out and marching three by three.
And we'll just have to call it a technical draw, I'm not claiming victory.

The mere fact that I was still alive was cause for celebration,
So I spat my breakfast over the side as a gesture to mark the occasion.

And although it was not yet nine o'clock, I was weary and chilled to the bone.
With a long slow slog still ahead of me, I turned her bow toward home.

Some folks want a life free of struggle and strife, while I'd chosen to live on the edge.
And I'd taken some risks with white-knuckled fists 'round many a breaking ledge.

Whether hauling by hand right in close to the land, or flogging it out to sea,
You weigh the risks and you hope for the best and I think that you'll have to agree,

That a tiny mistake may be all that it takes when the consequences are dire
'Cause it ain't a long way, all the old-timers say, from the frying pan into the fire.

Now I'll say in advance, there's a pretty good chance, that I'm always going to remember,
Nearly coming to grief at the Old Muddy Reef on that fourteenth day of December.

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