

Fishing

All he wanted was some thinking time. Quiet time. Away time. No Blodgett, no Adams, not even Ali. Just Tux, his boat, a rod and reel, the ocean. Pure fishing, for fun.

Tim told his Dad he was going out for bluefish for the smoker. Roger gave his son a hard look. Tim had been acting withdrawn, detached, for the past few days. Some fishing time, just fishing, could be good for him.

“Sure, son. Go for it. Be back for supper. Enjoy the day.”

So there he was, clearing the harbor mouth, his boat free of lobster gear and traps, Tux standing beside him, bracing against Tim for the swells, his casting pole in the rod holder, rigged with his favorite, battle-scarred bluefish plug, a popper. He thought about fishing by the rocks off the White Island lighthouse, but instead headed east for Boon Island Ledge. A little further run, still good for blues, more sea life, and fewer tourists or jerks.

Forty minutes of motoring got him to Boon Island and less than fifteen minutes later he was circling the ledge itself, an amazing place where the ocean shoaled to only few feet at low tide and fish, birds, and whales all gathered. Tim loved this spot and always loved being here regardless of whether or not he caught any fish. He was relaxing already.

After one scouting circuit around the ledge, Tim put the engine in neutral and drifted with the tide, casting toward the ledge itself, enjoying the act of casting, looking at the plug in the water but not seeing it. The bluefish strike jerked him back to the water and he was instantly into, really into, the fishing. As much as he loved the casting, the boat, being on the water, it was the strike, the connection to the fish on his hook that thrilled him. Now he was fishing again, and he quickly boated three blues.

The bite stopped as quickly as it started. With the boat back in gear, he made wider and wider circles, hunting. Off to the northwest, toward the lighthouse on the Boon Island itself, he saw birds diving, so he headed the boat in that direction. By the time he got there, the surface splashes and birds were gone. He killed the motor and threw his lure anyway. There would always be fish foraging beneath the surface after a flurry like that.

When his first retrieve came back untouched, he hurriedly changed the surface popper for a deep swimmer lure. If the fish were under, he'd go down to them. The lure he grabbed had bigger hooks than he liked, but there wasn't time to rummage for another. He needed to get his line back in the water quickly. He made a lower cast across the freshening wind and began the retrieve, surging the swimmer erratically.

Perhaps twenty yards of his 18# test braid was back on the spool when he felt the sudden stop of the strike, the connection he craved to something living at the other end of his line. Now the line was peeling off his reel faster than he had ever seen it go. For a long second he stared at the spool, not hearing its scream. Then Tux barked and he jumped to the wheel. If he didn't get the boat moving fast in the direction this fish was running, this fight would be over in seconds.

Tim switched the pole to his left hand, keeping the tip up and hoping the drag on the Shimano reel was set lightly enough. With his right hand he turned the key to start the engine, silently promising himself to always keep it running in the future. Even firing on the first turn, the startup cost him maybe half the line on the spool. By the time he got the boat in gear and up to low planning speed, the spool was almost empty. He was doing fourteen knots after the fish and still losing line.

Tim pushed the throttle forward to match the boat's speed to the fish's run, his eyes switching from the swells to the rod tip to the spool to the speedometer. At nineteen knots, almost his limit, line was not leaving his reel, but he could see the metal spool through gaps in the few remaining turns of line on it. Standing closer to the console, Tim wedged the wheel against his body, felt for the reel handle with his right hand, and tried to crank in some line. Impossible.

His right hand came off the reel handle and pushed the throttle forward the last little bit, up to the stop. The boat was slamming into the tops of the small swells, but the rod tip eased back to almost vertical. Wedging the wheel again, he was able to gain back some line as the fish raced toward deeper water. Tim knew how dangerous this was, no hands on the wheel, full out into swells, lobster trap buoys on the surface, barely keeping himself balanced on the deck.

"We can't hold him, Tux. All I want to do is not lose him on the first run."

Tim looked down to check the depth gauge, now at a hundred and thirty feet, and saw Tux still braced, this time against the gunwales, and looking dead ahead in the direction of the boat and the line. Tux was having his own adrenaline rush, matching his master.

"Hang on, Tux, hang on," yelled Tim over the spray, silently telling himself to hang on too.

Every minute seemed like a minute longer than he could possibly hang on. Suddenly, in one hundred fifty feet of water, the fish sounded to the bottom. Tim pulled back the throttle and as the boat fell off plane, he reeled in slack line. His rod was doubled over, the tip pointing straight down, but Tim had recovered about half of his braid back on the spool. Victory Number One.

Tim realized how lucky he was to have not been pitched overboard. The wind and the swells were still increasing, so he half inflated the float coat that his Dad made him always wear. Now he knew why. Tux as usual was wearing his own life jacket. Tux was a good swimmer, but that Gulf of Maine water was cold.

Before Tim had time to congratulate himself on stopping the fish, it took off on another run, again toward deeper water. He put the engine back in gear and began revving up to match the speed of the fish. He revved some more and kept pushing the throttle forward to its limit. Still the fish was taking his line, and the waves were keeping the boat from going any faster. What was this fish, doing twenty knots with a boat in tow?

Again it sounded, and again Tim regained line while it lurked below. He was amazed that his knots were holding, that the hooks on his lure had not opened, and that the drag on his reel had not seized up. Boon Island was now about two miles off his stern, and the seas were running one to two feet. The depth gauge read one hundred seventy five feet and dropping. Tim set himself a new goal: to see the

fish. If it was a tuna as he suspected, without a license he knew he couldn't boat the fish, even if his puny tackle held up, which he doubted. Just let me see it, he thought.

As if to deny his thoughts, the fish launched another run, once more toward still deeper water. Any bluefish would have long since begun to tire. No, with these speeds and at this depth, it was likely some kind of tuna. This time it ran for five minutes at twenty knots. Tim steered with one hand and clutched the pole with the other, with no hope of reeling. Then it sounded and stayed down. His rod was not stiff enough, the line not strong enough, to pump the fish up, but at least he wasn't losing line.

Tim was scanning the horizon looking for other boats when the fish made a dash to the surface. Tim couldn't spin the reel handle fast enough to keep tension on the line. With slack the fish could throw the lure. He reeled and he hoped, helped slightly by the fish moving away from the boat as it approached the surface.

Tim was bracing his upper legs against the starboard gunwale, with the pole and line angled off the starboard bow, at about two o'clock. He heard a splash off the starboard stern quarter, at five o'clock, and swiveled his head in time to see a huge silvery fish, over five feet long, shoot out of the water broadside to him, with a big eye seeming to give him the once-over.

"A bluefin!" shouted Tim. Tux saw it too and began to bark. Could there be that much slack in my line?

Tim swung his head back to the left, where his line was pointing. About forty yards out, about four feet deep, he saw that characteristic silver color again. Another bluefin, not nearly as big as the first, but this one was attached to his line. Victory Number Two.

Before he could recover any slack, 'his' fish took off again, and again Tim was running the boat at close to top speed to avoid losing too much line. Only now the swells were bigger, not yet breaking, but with small whitecaps on several. Tim was forced to angle the boat through a few, which cost him more line. His admiration for the toughness of this fish kept growing, along with his awe for the giant that broached. These were magnificent creatures. What was he doing fighting them?

But fighting he was, and losing. After two more runs, it was an effort merely to stay on his feet, and his hands were getting numb. He was reeling in from the respite of another sounding and run for the surface when he saw color again, a scant thirty feet away, right in front of where his line plunged into the water. He checked his spool and saw that, surprisingly, he had most of his line back. But this couldn't be his fish--the angles were all wrong.

It wasn't. It was the giant again, huge, finning next to his line, watching him, close enough for Tim to see a large scar by his gills. The bigger fish seemed to lean into the line to the smaller tuna, creating still more pressure on it, bending the rod tip almost one hundred eighty degrees toward the water. Tim loosened the drag and bowed to the fish, lowering his rod the way he read about in fishing magazines to create some slack, but it wasn't enough. Suddenly the rod straightened and recoiled back into him. There was a clattering as his lure shot out of the water and hit the outside of the boat hull. If his rod tip had been up higher, it would have cleared the gunwale and launched right at him. Now the reel was quiet and the rod straight, with the line hanging slack from the tip.

Tim reeled in the lure, keeping it away from the ever-curious Tux, hooked it on a line guide, and stuffed his rig in the nearby rod holder on the starboard gunwale. Then he sat on the port gunwale, exhausted, and stared across his boat at his rod and the ocean beyond. The boat rolled in the trough between some swells. Tux came over to him and nuzzled his hand on his knee.

“That was some fish, Tux. I’m sorta glad it got away. Now it’s time to go home.”

The waves were up to three feet and the wind was blowing at least twenty out of the west. Conditions had gotten a lot worse during the fight without him really noticing. He figured they were outside the line between Boon Island and the Shoals. It would be a rough ride back to the harbor into a quartering sea. Tim picked a heading that he thought would take them to Whaleback Light and started back at a moderate speed, not up on plane. Then he eased back to neutral for a moment to put on his slicker jacket. It was going to be a wet ride also.

As he motored home, he kept thinking about the two bluefins. He wasn’t disappointed. His fish deserved to live. The more he thought about the end of the fight, the more he was convinced that the larger fish had consciously intervened to put that extra pressure on his line. And that scar by its head—was this the same bluefin that he and Ali saw when they were sailing?

Finally he saw the Isles of Shoals off his port bow and pointed that way. He left Duck Island to starboard and tucked into Gosport Harbor in the lee of Appledore Island to clean his bluefish and catch a break from the pounding they were taking going upwind to get home. When the fillets were in the cooler and the deck scrubbed, he unhooked his lure and put it back in his tackle box. Then he dropped the buoy he was using, left the island harbor and headed due north to Whaleback.

The closer he got to Portsmouth Harbor, the better he felt. The weariness from the battle dropped off him, leaving only the excitement and exhilaration of the whole experience and his admiration for the bluefin. He was on top of his world, at least until the Orca, with Blodgett and Whitey on board, pulled alongside, also on their way into the harbor. Whitey was motioning with that universal hand signal for him to pick up on the radiophone.

“Beaumer. Beaumer. Beaumer. This is Orca. Switch to 8.”

“Orca, this is Osprey switching 8.” The jerks couldn’t even use his boat’s name, thought Tim. What the heck did they want now?

“Beaumer, what are you doing out in seas like this in a bathtub like that?” came back Blodgett on Channel 8.

“Fishing for bluefin,” said Tim, and the moment he said it he knew he shouldn’t have.

“Bluefin? Really? In that rig?” Tim could hear Whitey laughing in the background. When would he learn to keep his mouth shut.

“So kid, how many did you catch?”

“Had one on. Broke him off.”

“You broke him off? Really?” said Blodgett scornfully. “Next time, if there ever is a next time, you leave the tuna to real fishermen. Ones who know what they’re doing.” There was a pause while he waited for a response, but Tim said nothing, so Blodgett continued. “And kid, stay out of my way, you hear me?”

Tim broke off the exchange with a radio-proper formality. “Have a good day, Captain. Osprey out.” Then, waves and spray be damned, he pushed his throttle all the way forward and accelerated away into the harbor.