

Getting Back

by George S. Nammack

Some years ago, my good friend, Knox Armstrong, publisher of Dun's Review magazine where I was director of promotion, graciously invited me, my wife, Bjorg, and the children to enjoy our vacation at his family's ancestral "summer cottage" on the shores of beautiful Muscongus Bay, in Friendship, Maine. I don't recall spending a great deal of time pondering the proposal; I accepted before he could speak another word. Knox said the fishing was great and I could use his skiff. He added that some of his immediate and extended families would be in residence in the family "compound" assembled among three other waterfront homes nearby, and that his brother John and wife Bunty would take us sailing with cousin Priscilla and her husband aboard *Memory*, their vintage Friendship sloop. We'd be invited to lobster dinners on the rocky islands in the bay. The picture he painted was irresistible.

Everyone was excited. We'd never visited Maine, but had spent vacations on the Cape and Nantucket and at Montauk. We loaded the station wagon with George, Jr., 13, Kristian, 11, and Louise, nine. We added both summer and cool weather clothing, fishing tackle, maps, and handwritten directions from Knox (relatives' phone numbers; how to light the huge kitchen oil stove for cooking and heat; the best stores and restaurants and the like) and very high spirits. Arriving at the "cottage," having survived hours of when will we be there, we were amazed to see a venerable, three-story, brown-shingled edifice with a wrap-around porch. It faced a shimmering Muscongus that seemed to beam greetings through the twilight. We met the neighbor, explored house, barn and grounds, had dinner and fell into our beds as if pole-axed.

What roused us early the following morning was the sound of mens' voices rising across our balcony and through the screened bedroom windows. I put on my robe and stepped out on the balcony to check the early birds. First light glinted off the copper of coming autumn. The robe felt good. I wouldn't have needed it back on Long Island.

Just across the narrow, macadam road from Knox's was the great Muscongus. In it, just 60 feet offshore, two lobstermen were tending their traps from beamy Down East boats, the kind I really love. I watched them winch up the traps, reach in for the catch, check size, barrel the keepers, chuck the shorts, rebait, shut the doors and drop the traps in again for another hopefully successful seduction. All this action was being punctuated with yeps, nopes, chuckles, and one somewhat surprising irreverence about the imminent departure of "them summer people." It was something like hoping that the departing tourists would not permit their collective screen doors to hit them in their collective Bermuda-shortened posteriors on the way out. I remember thinking about what the state tourist board and the local chamber would feel about that sentiment, when my wife joined me on the balcony to ask what was going on.

Her voice carried out to the boats, the men spotted us and changed their operation immediately. Harvesting the next line of pots, they maneuvered both boats in such a way as to turn their backs to the balcony, shielding from our prying eyes the hauled pots and their contents. Bjorg's theory was that not only were we strangers up here for a week - a span that failed to even qualify us as summer people - but that

small 10hp kicker on her transom plate. Knox's only cautions, aside from accidentally burning the house down, were not to hole the boat - easy to do in rocky Maine - and to make sure that I dropped the mooring anchor and buoy at least 75 yards offshore to allow for the tides.

I wheelbarrowed the large mushroom anchor, chain, anchor rode and buoy down to the skiff, got the motor going, and ran out to set the mooring, being me, a good 100 yards off the sharp-edged beach. Looking at those rocks, I conjured the sugary sands of Jones Beach, Fire Island, Point

Lookout, Long Beach, Atlantic Beach and the Rockaways, and thought how lucky we were to be Long Islanders. But we were on a new adventure, the trade-off. Back in the shallows, I rigged a bow line and staked it between two rocks, dropped the stern anchor, then took everyone to the tackle shop in town. The kids were getting into it. Bjorg was describing several Norwegian recipes for mackerel.

We rigged up after lunch, put life jackets on the kids, and cast off with two trolling rods and three hand lines tipped with long sets of multicolored tiny bucktails. It was the kind of day for which water colorists wait. A fresh breeze out of the northeast made for a small chop and an occasional slap of chilly Muscongus spray. On our first pass, about a quarter mile off, we started to hit fish. We had a dollar pool for first fish, biggest fish and most fish. Bjorg made that look academic by landing four tinkers at one time. After a couple of hours, we had a full bucket of shiny blue-black tinker mackerel, so we put in at a small, rocky island and passed around the Kool-Aid and cookies. The kids combed among the rocks ringing the island and found several handmade wooden lobster pot buoys, which dangle still in all their saltiness from my garden shed. They found as well the remains of what must have been a very merry campfire, a number of reddened lobster shells and claws, and four empty champagne bottles, which I had wished could talk. Or, in deference to the kids, at least whisper.

We cast off in late afternoon. The breeze had gone gusty, which made our trip across the bay a little bumpy. I nosed into the shallows across from Knox's and the family disembarked, taking everything with them except the oars. I handed over my shirt and straw hat. The air felt on the dark side of cool; I knew that it would be a two-blanket night. Heading out to the mooring, I called back to my wife to ask that she make me a scotch on the rocks, and that I'd be right in to sit on the porch with her to watch the curtsying sun submerge slowly into the Muscongus' graying embrace.

I made certain that everything was shipshape. Knox had been a naval officer in World War , so I tidied up as if he was standing there over my shoulder. Oarlocks down. Oars shipped on starboard side of thwarts. Outboard raised, tilted and locked. Pelican hook snapped to eye-ring. Aye-aye, sir! Time to swim back. The skiff was light and tippy. I stood on the center thwart and did a high-arched front dive. I had never swum in Maine waters, and the spray I had encountered earlier did not do their shocking temperature justice. I came up gasping and took off in a sprinting crawl.

At 43, I was only 10 pounds over my lifeguard and water polo days and could still move. This was different water. Within 40 yards, it ate up my kick and grabbed my chest like a steel tourniquet. I was starting to shut down. I went into a slow breast

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Louise Nammack, 9, clad in part of our host's WWII Naval uniform, plays "Taps" at Friendship, ME, 1974.

I looked like an IRS agent counting how many lobster (dollars) were coming over the side. We laughed and headed downstairs for breakfast and to plan the day's activities with the kids.

They were up and looking around. Where's the TV? It's cold here. Can we go to a movie? I observed that we had not driven six hours to go to a movie, and that today we were going to be real Mainers. We were going to troll for tinker mackerel out in the bay. Two yays and a boo. Had I known what was to happen later in the day, I would have insisted on going to a movie. But then, you almost never have a crystal ball along when you really need one, do you?

Knox had told me that we were to make ourselves at home, and that we had free run. That included the aluminum skiff. My sons helped me to carry it from the barn, down the lawn and across the road. We slid her into the water, and I mounted the

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stroke and looked up at the house. My wife and daughter were on the top step of the porch. They waved. They had no idea. I managed a smile, which, in retrospect, must have resembled the kind managed by a quiz show contestant when he or she wins a crocodile on a leash. I waved back. Who of my friends would believe that a swimmer with my experience was going to drown just 50 yards offshore? I was angry. Then, I started to pray.

Please, this isn't right. They need me. So, I was stupid. Please. Do something. I put my face down into the water and looked around. I was looking for anything to stand on to get a quick rest. I saw several lobster pots some 15 feet below, nothing else. I stroked over and followed one of their lines to the small terminal buoy. No help. There was little left in my arms and legs. I looked underwater again. About 20 feet away, a huge granite boulder loomed. I hadn't seen

it before. I reached it somehow and stood up on it into the chilly air, my entire chest above the surface. Whipping my arms across my chest a few times, I was able to get some deep breaths. My body was responding.

Up on the porch, they were giving me "Come on, slow poke!" looks. I sprinted the rest of the way, ran across the road and up the lawn to the porch. I hugged all of them, told them nothing, and took my scotch into a long, hot shower. There I said a prayer of thanks.

It was a two-blanket night. The next day, I borrowed the neighbor's boat and towed the skiff back to shore. The boys helped me put it back into the barn, then we all piled into the car and headed for the movies. I smiled as I sat in the darkness eating popcorn and watching Charlton Heston do superhuman things in *The Omega Man*. He was impressive, but, then again, not once was he required to swim 100 yards in 50-degree water. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

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