

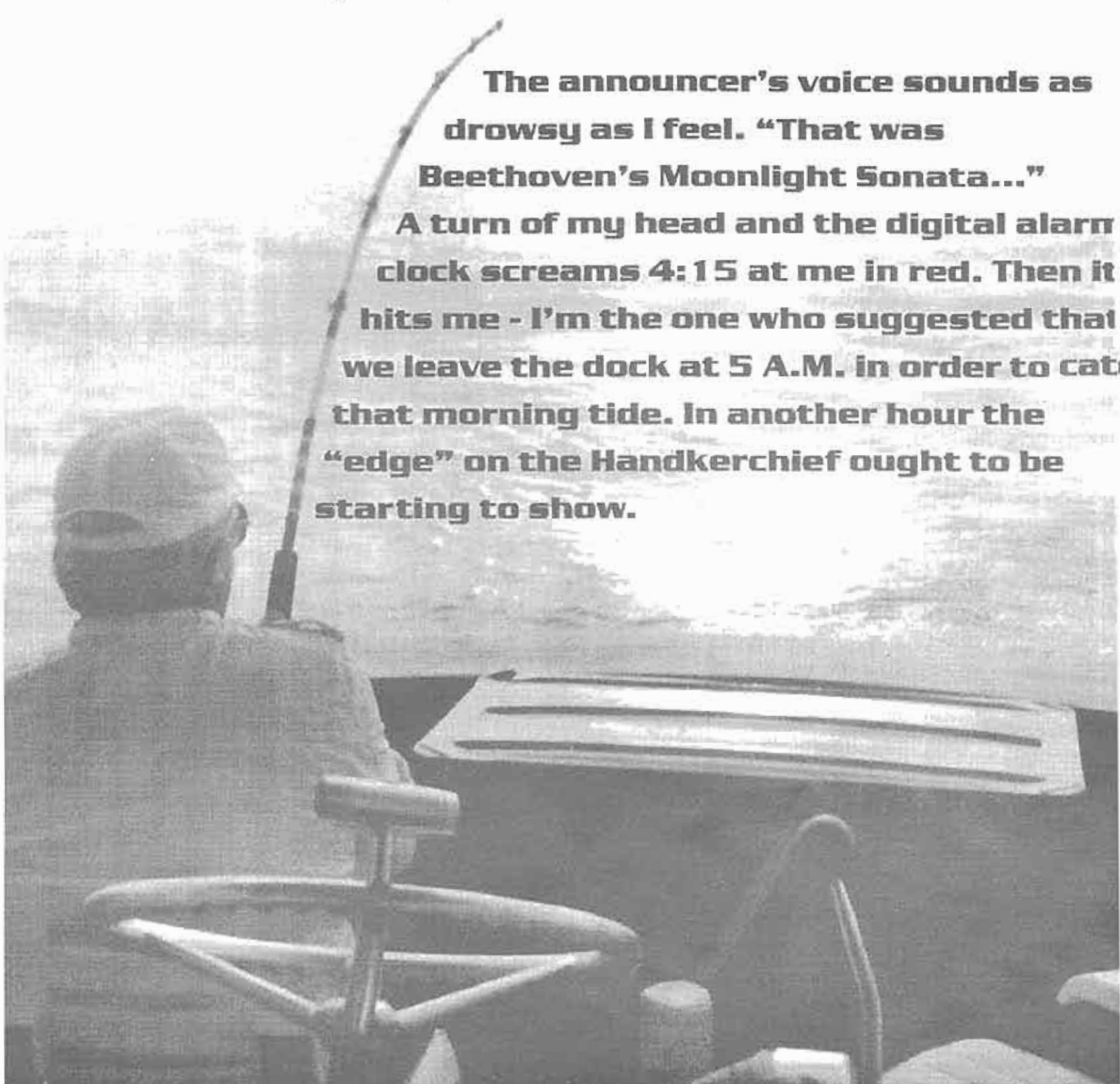
A Trip To

Handkerchief

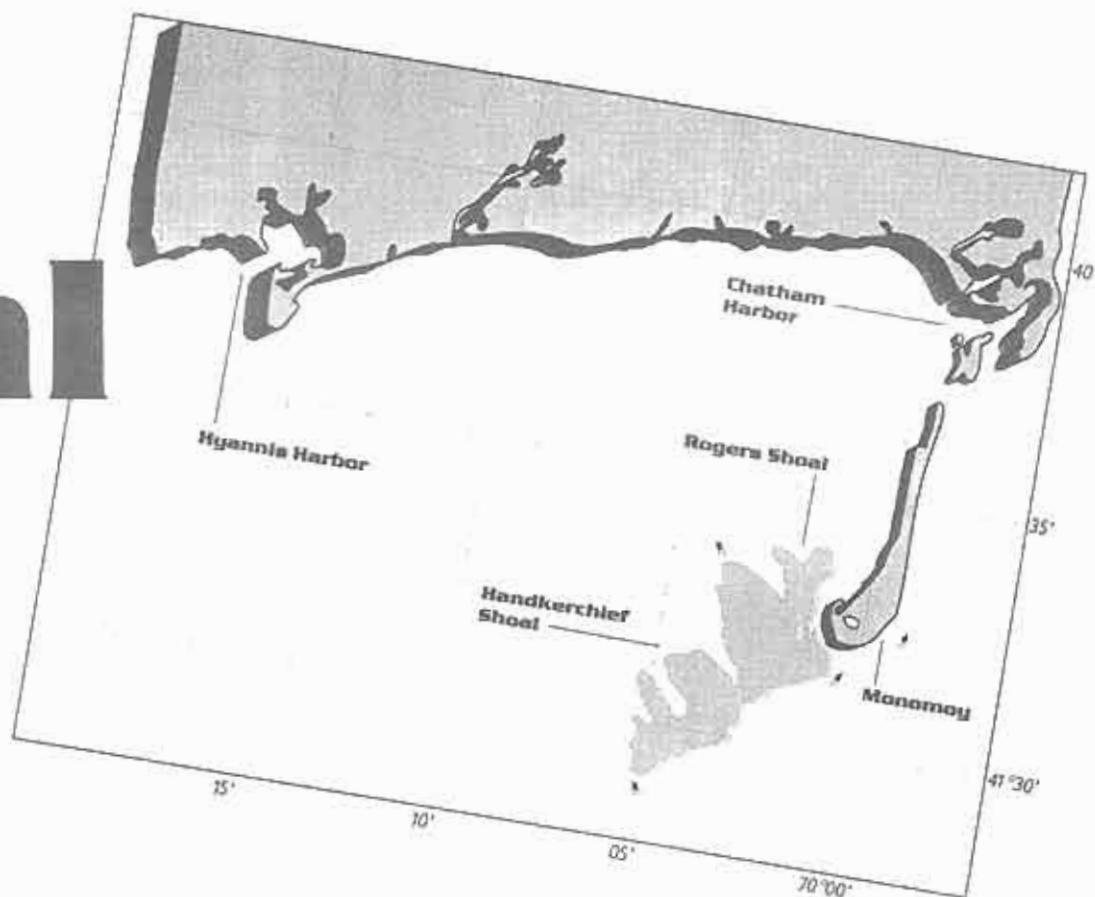
by Captain Ron Murphy

The announcer's voice sounds as drowsy as I feel. "That was Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata..."

A turn of my head and the digital alarm clock screams 4:15 at me in red. Then it hits me - I'm the one who suggested that we leave the dock at 5 A.M. in order to catch that morning tide. In another hour the "edge" on the Handkerchief ought to be starting to show.



Shoal



What's that? I strain to hear if those are leaves that I detect rustling outside. Wind in the pre-dawn darkness can make many a skipper roll over and go back to sleep; most days, if a "breeze is gonna come on" it'll be after the sun comes up. But this is just an intermittent rustle I hear; a glance out the bedroom window reveals not a leaf moving - in fact - where's the tree? FOG! Somewhere out there the world exists, but right now reality ends at 50 feet. Mann, is it thick! I can hear them now: "I drove all the way down here for this?"

Oh well, time to eat donuts. When I get to the dock, my trip is already anxiously waiting. A few comforting words about the fog, a check of the engine's vi-

tal signs and we're ready to go. Before we untie, I've got the radar warmed up and tuned in. Even the late night gulls with Baxter's French fry hangovers show up as lazy green blips on the screen. Let's see - too early for the first ferry returning from Nantucket. I just have to watch for other outgoing and incoming fishermen.

I pull out my homemade chart of the harbor channel; somehow I had the good sense to make it up on a bluebird day. I proceed to count off each buoy as we make our way out: 15, 13 and 11 - now a straight shot to that speck at noon on the screen. "the Spindle." This unlit set of rocks acts as my harbor's front gate. When you're coming in at night, you want to make sure the gate is open; when

you're leaving in fog like this, you want to know that you've passed it before you head out. The fog opens up out here to 70 feet and the Spindle's ghost appears off my port. A last check of my LORAN's accuracy (I've memorized these numbers) and the Stray Cat turns east, heading for the Hanky 11 miles away.

The radio crackles with a familiar voice. I reply, "Hey Uncle Les, what's today's song?" This is a little game I play with the captain of the Rosey S., my dock neighbor. Les sings back, "How about 'I Can See Clearly Now...'"

"Hey Les, keep the day job!"

He reports that five miles out the fog still holds. Oh well, another day of living in a golf ball.

The depth finder's numbers increase and the water temperature drops as we head further east. I tell the crowd on board not to be surprised to find a drop in the sea and air temperature of 10 to 15 degrees out to the east around Monomoy - even in the middle of August. I make a mental note of our running time and course reciprocal, in case the Coast Guard decides this is the perfect day to shut down the LORAN system for maintenance. Been there - done that.

On the trip out my mate Brendan, who is also my 16-year-old son, groggily checks each rod's drag setting, puts on fresh leader material and ties on lures. Spinning rods and fly rods are rigged and readied. I'll start with a varied color

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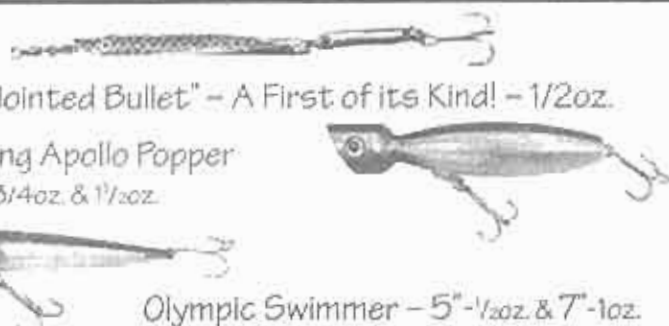
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We're getting close. The water temperature has gone from 72 to 58 degrees! With this flood tide starting, the temperature will soon climb to the mid-60s. I'll have to plan our next stop to be further east, as the bass shut down due to warming water.

A concher's string of pots show off the starboard, an opportune time to see if the tide has started yet. The pot buoys lean to the east, indicating that it's just begun to flood. The thick fog over this cold water leaves droplets hanging on everything aboard. My eyes constantly scan the radar's ghostly green display. This vigilance pays off in another way. Several exclamation marks appear and disappear at an eighth of a mile - birds.

We're a few hundred yards away now and the edge of the Hanky shows up as a scraggly green line. Before we start fishing, I'll first try to determine if there's any company around us. Sometimes the radar's imprint of a rip can hide the presence of a commercial skiff - with deadly consequences. As we drift to the edge of the rip, the sound of the birds can be heard close off our port. I note the LORAN numbers and swing

back up to in front of the rip. Crabbing the boat along the edge brings us to the sight I never tire of: bass are rolling in the edge, crashing in front of the rip. Judging by the big gulls working over them, they're chasing sizable bait, probably squid.

Brendan has three anglers with spinning rods ready along the transom. The first cast into the melee brings a viscous strike to the big Gibbs pencil popper, knocking it clear out of the water 30 feet behind the boat. The boat erupts with yells; I remind everyone to slow down. Those big bass are moving a lot of water in front of them, requiring you to bring the plug in slower than you would for blues. In no time, the stern has three anglers all holding bent rods with reels complaining noisily of big fish.

The morning fishing continues until the action subsides. A glance at the sea temperature gauge shows 66 degrees. It's time to move east to cooler water. The sun has dissipated most of the fog now, and Monomoy becomes visible two miles off to the east. Someone slips a tape into the cassette player. "Ahh," I sigh, "Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata." One of the anglers exclaims, "Hey Cap - how'd you know that?" Been there - done that. *1998*

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