

Why We Sail

(adapted version for audio story)

By John D. Norton

We sit in our sailboat on a windless day under slack sails, becalmed. The air is motionless, the water is glassy, and the sun is hot. We are scanning, looking for clues. We are watching the horizon for the massing clouds that might bring a weather change. We are watching distant chimneys and trees and flagpoles for any sign of a breeze. We are keeping a careful eye on the water for those dark smudges that reveal a puff of wind approaching.

When the puff comes, there is the moment. It is a gentle snap as the breeze presses against the sails and the rigging is pulled taut. There is a little scuffle on board as we pull on the sheets and rudder to make the most of this little wind. There is no engine noise to tell us we are moving. We look down at the water and watch the little bits of weed and debris pass. We look back at our rising wake and listen to the quiet gurgle of water moving under the hull. "We're sailing," we say.

It is a magical feeling. The breeze has filled our little boat with life. We are carried by a force we cannot see but feel in the slight list of the hull, the tension in the sheets that hold the sails and the gentle pull on the rudder as it tries to recenter.

The gentle breezes fill our sailboat with a gentle life. The experience is restful. We have time to watch and wonder, to plot and replot our course, to second guess, to let a hand dangle over the side and feel the force with which we are pulled through the water.

Then the breeze picks up and we have real wind. We have no more time to dally and dangle. Our sails are now filled with a strong and angry power. Our wake is a broad, long gash in the water. The hull heels and lifts. We let out the mainsail to righten ourselves and then carefully haul it back in as the sailboat picks up speed.

Now the real sailing begins. We scan the water for where the wind is best. It has us tacking back and forth so we can pick up the good wind from the clearest water and avoid the wind shadow in the lee of a looming headland.

It is like riding a wild beast. It presses hard and goes where it wants to, at first. Then we regain control. We steer the bow a little closer to the wind, trimming the sails inch by inch until they start to "luff," to flap in grumpy little ripples. Then we let them out just enough, so the sails go smooth. We make tiny adjustment in this or that sheet, feeling how each affects our motion. All the while we are trimming the sails to get the best effect. We are no longer hanging on to the wild beast as it careens across the water. We are commanding it and it obeys.

This is the moment and that is why we sail.