

Rites of Passage

OSPREY'S FLIGHT Standing his first solo night watches, a young sailor becomes a young man. **BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE**

SAY THE WORD SOFTLY, BECAUSE A PART OF ME doesn't want to say it at all: "Hey." Ever since my kids were babies and I hoarded sleep like a squirrel does nuts, I've had an almost phobic aversion to waking sleeping children. Sleep is peace, sleep is nurture, sleep is sacred. And here in his bunk my son sleeps. Curled around a beloved old blanket his grandmother gave him, he looks far more child than man. But it's his turn for watch. He'd never forgive me, really, if I let him be late.

"Hey." I nudge him gently and his eyes open. He flops his hand at me, as if to wave me away.

"I'm on it," he says. His voice has dropped at least another

I sit in the cockpit with the logbook in my lap, making the hourly entry. I need reading glasses to do it now, and a strong headlamp. Kaoe climbs out the companionway with a cup of lemonade in his hand. He gazes upward through the open bimini. "Where's the moon?" he asks.

"Not up for a while yet. Lots of good stars, though." I give him the lowdown, which is thankfully brief. When we were crossing the Caribbean a few weeks ago, hundreds of miles from land and in the trades' steady rhythm, the night watches were magically peaceful. Since making the turn north and heading up the U.S. East Coast, the night watches have ranged from controlled chaos (among dozens of ships

off the port of Miami) to relative quiet. So far tonight, the only issue has been some lightning off to the east, out in the Gulf Stream. I hope it will stay there.

I hand over the Lifetag transmitter. Its little green light blinks. Awfully small reassurance, I think, to a mother leaving her son alone in the middle of the night on the unforgiving sea. "Don't forget to give the crew on *Rachel* a call before midnight," I tell him. "Julie will be on."

"I won't."

"And you can call her anytime, you know, if you need some help staying awake."

"I know."

"Don't leave the cockpit, right? If anything weird happens, if you need anything, Daddy and I are right

here, OK?" Shut up, I'm thinking to myself. He'll be fine. Let him go. "I mean, you know all this."

"Off you go then," he says to me. "Get some sleep." I feel a strange sense of role reversal as he sends me off to bed. I know I'm seeing the future, even as the past rolls over me like a wave. There's been no formal ritual marking his passage through that mythical doorway into adult-

hood, no blessing in any traditional house of God or catered party with a hundred of his parents' best friends. There are only the long hours of the watch, the weight of our 45-foot world, and the solitude of a million ancient stars standing witness. With little fuss and a quiet pride, our son watches over us, the burden steady on the shoulders of a young man.

Once the refit of *Osprey* is complete, the Clarkes plan to be back in the Bahamas for Christmas.



octave in this last year. The person climbing out of the bunk, slipping into a spare pair of his father's seaboots (now his), and pulling on a harness is someone new. And just now, he left the boy back in the bunk, tucked under that still warm blanket.

Kaoe was about 2 months old the first time he went sailing. This spring, he turned 14. And as we planned our passage from Panama back to Chesapeake Bay, my husband, Johnny, and I decided it was time. He was old enough, mature enough, and sea-wise enough to stand a solo night watch. We had, on our way south from Honduras last fall, watched him emerge as a confident helmsman, taking day watches with his younger sister while hand-steering in 25 to 30 knots and heading dead downwind in 8- to 12-foot seas. He did it with a joyful insouciance that took my breath away.

Crossing a threshold, Kaoe Clarke stands a solo night watch on *Osprey*, making his debut among the company of bluewater sailors.