

Livin' on a Prayer

A Father's Day Story

◀ By Dave Gendell



■ Woah, we're half way there...

A crabber can purchase chicken necks at the Giant supermarket in Annapolis. This fact, alone, should provide a degree of comfort to those concerned about the present and future state of the city. On some days, the crabber must specifically ask for chicken necks at the butcher counter. On other days, they are out in the display case with the rest of the chicken parts. Be advised that there is no code for chicken necks in Giant's digital inventory system, so they are tagged and rung up as "Chicken Backs." Local knowledge. Knowing all of this makes me happy as I carry a plastic bag of chicken necks out of the store early on a bright morning in late July.

A craftsman aims to match tool to task. He is never comfortable with the compromises of a generalist. A craftsman maintains access to a carefully selected variety of high-quality, specialized instruments. An important,

and most satisfying, part of any project is knowing what tool is required to do the job followed by the very act of reaching and then finding it ready and available. This is part of what separates the craftsman from the novice. This is what elevates the experience from a tossed-off chore to a honed process. Match tool to task. Chicken Necks for crabbing, not Chicken Backs. Proper.

In the same spirit, a Chesapeake River Rat aims to have a small fleet of vessels and a wide breadth of options at his disposal. A well-chosen, close-at-hand collection of disparate small craft will satisfy the River Rat in a way that no single large boat ever could. Match tool to task.

This floating flexibility is especially important when young children are in the mix. With kids, a menu of options is the key feature. Timelines are condensed. The ability to move from idea to afloat in the shortest pos-

sible window of time is highly desirable, as is the ability to shift destination, or even vessels, at a moment's notice.

I was raised a Chesapeake Bay River Rat—black mud between toes, crabbing by flashlight in the humid pre-dawn; warm, teenage beers on Dobbins Island; a chalky blue beater Laser purchased at 14 with lawn-mowing money... For the past 13 years I have been a dad as well. The two roles are both now in my blood, but they do not always synch well, especially in these worried and over-scheduled days. Some parents do not even allow their kids to swim in the Bay! But between Lazer Tag, lacrosse practice, endless lunches at Panera, and trips to the toy section at Target, our family carries the line forward in our own modest way. We sail, we fish a little, we go crabbing, we spend the night at anchor, we drop the kids off at sailing camp, we scrub the boats, we console each other when a new bathing suit is turned yellowy-brown by the Bay, we drag the crew behind the boat in plastic tubes, we rig a tiny windsurfer sail and stand the kids up with it, we swim in the Bay... It's never enough for me, of course but we try. We try.

"Big Day. A. Big. Big. Day," I announce, bursting into the house with the chicken necks and a melting bag of ice. Eyes roll. Electronic devices are consulted. Something about sunscreen is mentioned. Somewhere a door slams.

Thirty minutes later, the boy and I are anchored in the sunlight with six crab lines deployed. We float a few feet above the muddy shelf at the mouth of Lake Ogleton. Our lines murmur a couple of times with a gentle tug of promise, but for more than an hour, they hang inactive. I tell the boy that the crabs can smell the Giant air-conditioning on the chicken. He considers this for a moment and then agrees. It's time to shift the scene. These choice days of high summer are best spent purposefully moving from small, wet boat to small, wet boat. That's the way.

A few minutes later, after a cell phone call, the older sisters arrive at the pier with



A well-chosen collection of disparate small craft will satisfy the River Rat.

packed lunches, two big inflated tubes, and a heap of polypropylene towline. Thanks, Mom! We are soon underway with both tubes planing and broad smiles flashing. After a few runs I overhear the words "ice cream" passed among the crew.

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■ Floating flexibility is especially important when children are in the mix.

The three kids have recently discovered the classic 1980s song “Livin’ on a Prayer” by Bon Jovi. I blast it on through the boat speakers on request, over and over. The morning turns into afternoon, and a warm southerly breeze begins to show itself across the surface. As always, it is the lure of that building summer southerly that shifts the storyline.

There is a clean and beautiful sloop, silent in the sun and tugging on its lines about two miles upriver. We have permission. We know the companionway lock combination. We have access to the right tool for the next job.

“New plan,” I announce enthusiastically as Bon Jovi winds down for the

tenth time. They protest, and the breeze builds. A compromise is quickly reached. I will tow them in their tubes all the way into Back Creek where we will pull the tubes aboard the powerboat, tie it off, and move onto the day’s next adventure. It is all a hot summer daydream for the River Rat but likely an overreach for the dad. Undaunted, I push upriver as our Bon Jovi soundtrack repeats.

Thirty minutes later we have shifted boats and raised the mainsail. I cleat off the mainsheet and quickly cut the engine. “We’re not even out of the creek yet,” one of them says. “It’s a sailing trip now,” I answer, perhaps a bit too cavalierly.

Almost immediately the sloop heels over with varnished port toerail dragging in the warm water. I decide to hold off on unfurling the jib. As we move from creek out into the river, the waves suddenly seem a lot sharper than they had on the powerboat. The breeze pushes through 15 knots, and the crew is unhappy. The crew is very unhappy.

Suddenly, there are shiny rivers of tears running down sun-kissed cheeks. There is a heartbreaking howling. I can blame dehydration. I can blame the heat. I can be frustrated with them for worrying too much about the waves and the heeling. I can blame Mom, who opted to stay home for this one. Hand on the tiller, I silently run through all of these routes in my head, but I know that I have pushed too hard. Over-scheduled and over-reached. I have attached my own ambitions to the kids. I interrupted tubing and derailed ice cream dreams to chase my own faded memories in the warm southerly.

I pull the tiller up under my chin. The stern swings through the breeze with a whoosh of whitewater. The big main gybes across in one smooth sweep. Just five minutes out of the creek and now we are heading for home with an ice cream stop along the way. I smile a little smile and now the kids do, too.

About the Author: Dave Gendell is the co-founder and former editor of *SpinSheet*. He lives in Annapolis with his family.

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