

## Water Teachings

By Kurt Arehart

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At one in the morning with not a puff of breeze, the harbor was quiet, the water still this summer night. Under a bright moon the dipping of oars expertly feathered in and out was scarcely audible as she easily pulled her dory across the mirror-still surface. How odd it was that this new friendship, just hours old, had Kevin reclining on the stern thwart of this gorgeous rowboat, his back resting against the sloping transom.

Audrey was the expert, with hundreds of hours at the oars. And it was her boat. And it was her show. She had been very clear on all these points as they left the party for this spontaneous harbor tour.

Her dory had been hand made locally and it was a joy to behold and ride in. Of varnished cedar and mahogany, this was no simple working dory. Its narrow flat bottom was an elongated and pointed oval, lightly bellied, and the sides elegantly curved to a point at the bow and to the sharply raked and narrow transom at the stern

Audrey eased the boat toward the center of the Marblehead Harbor, her oars creaking gently in the mahogany pins that rose from the cap rails.

The dory had seemed tippy when Kevin stepped down from the dock, but once settled and under way, the craft glided smoothly under Audrey's certain hands. And Kevin loved this. He had always been attracted to strong, capable women.

Audrey was checking all the boxes. Lean and compactly powerful, she moved like an athlete and had spoken of plans to row vast distances and maybe notch a few speed records. Kevin spent his days in a cubicle early in a corporate finance career. Audrey stood in hard contrast to career professional women he normally met. Hers seemed a simple life lived outdoors and with clear purpose. No political scheming and intrigue. Just a quiet laugh at the joy of rowing her beautiful boat well.

"I have an idea," Audrey murmured. It was barely above a whisper and Kevin believed she shared his respect for the stillness, and the likelihood that some were sleeping in the many boats they glided past in the moonlit Marblehead Harbor. Kevin said nothing, still fixed by the gentle moanings of the oar collars in their pins, the artful feather and dip of the blades.

"There's something I've been wanting out here," Audrey went on, still in the low murmur.

Age 26, Kevin was disposed to hear a sexual overture, and a unique one at that, and found himself leaning in. Still, he said nothing. A more casual interest seemed best with such beginnings.

“Did you know the Naval Academy sloop Resolve is anchored here in the harbor?”

Perplexed, Kevin matched her murmur. “No.”

“They’re on a training cruise up the coast and arrived a few days back.”

Kevin again said nothing, weighing this unexpected turn in conversation, still not fully abandoning the notion of passion in a gently rocking boat.

“Some of the cadets are total jackasses.”

“Ah. So you’ve met a few.”

“They turn up in the local saloons. Pretty high opinion of themselves.”

Sitting on the stern thwart and facing forward, Kevin could easily look past Audrey’s shoulder and see where she was headed. A single-masted racing sloop, maybe 50 feet long, lay at anchor, the masthead light dimly glowing. Otherwise she was dark, with no noticeable movement aboard.

“You see that pennant hanging from the transom?”, Audrey gestured her head toward the sloop.

Perplexity gave way to mild disappointment. “Yes I do.”

“Well I want it. It would serve those assholes right to lose their precious pennant in the middle of Marblehead Harbor.”

“Wait. You mean you want to take it now?”

“Yup! I’ll just ease up to the stern and if you stand on the thwart you can reach up and pull the pennant for me. This will be fun.”

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Kevin was just turning seven that summer, and he was thin even by the standards of 1962. His mother reckoned that comfort in the water was an essential survival skill and so enrolled him in beginner swimming lessons at the Bustleton Swim Club in Northeast Philadelphia. 9am, Monday through Friday. Even in July the pool water had a morning chill and Kevin’s teeth were chattering with the cold just for sitting on the side with his feet dangling in. He was too thin, too small, too conflicted about the promised benefits of this torture. His core temperature was falling, his buoyancy was non-existent, and aside from the fact that cold water will take your body heat and maybe fill your lungs, little learning would happen this day.

By age twelve Kevin was just starting to believe he could learn physical things. Catching balls, hitting balls had been elusive skills for years. Now he was putting on some size and got his first pair of glasses, correcting a severe near-sightedness. Things were coming a good bit easier.

So when he joined his Boy Scout troop for a week at summer camp he was far more open to loading up on merit badge skill classes. Kevin believed, for the first time, that he could learn new physical skills and have some fun doing it. If you applied for the rowing merit badge, you got to row around on the Delaware River. And if you applied for the canoeing merit badge, you got to paddle up and down the river some more. And if you tried for the swimming merit badge you got more pool time. The swimming badge brought water instruction when Kevin was ready for it, when he had more core mass for heat regulation, a little more buoyancy and a lot more belief in his capacity to learn. While still incapable of settling into an aerobic, sustainable crawl stroke, he learned he could rotate through breaststroke, sidestroke, and most mercifully, elementary backstroke for sustainably indefinite periods.

Even with legs of lead that promptly sought the bottom of whatever water he was navigating, the elementary backstroke permitted a short beat of effortless glide before his feet would start to sink, requiring the next stroke, and this was a breakthrough. Now Kevin believed he could swim a half mile across a lake and back again simply by rotating through these three strokes. And it was so. Water was no longer an adversary, just another place to be. Sometimes a really nice place to be.

And lack of buoyancy was not so bad. If Kevin relaxed and slowly emptied his lungs he would sink to the bottom of the pool and just lay there, playing with his capacity to delay his next breath. As oxygen-need screamed at him Kevin would stay down, watching the second hand on his Timex, keen on staying under a full minute. And then two. Turned out he could beat most other youth in this narrow discipline. Kevin found that holding breath requires staying calm and letting the discomfort of oxygen-need roll over you.

Then it was swimming a length of the swim club pool underwater, coming up for air only when the far wall was touched. Then two lengths without a breath. Going without breathing for a bit is one thing. Doing so while swimming vigorously underwater was something more. Kevin would never be swim team material, but he had his own specialty, his own defining quality, and that was enough.

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“No way,” Kevin pronounced flatly. “I am not helping you steal that pennant.”

“Who knew what a whussy I let in my boat? You looked like a man back at the party.”

“Yeah, well if we get caught, I know who’s ass is going to get beat by the cadets on watch. Quite manly, getting your ass beat for trying to steal a pennant.”

“Look, we’re out here in my boat. My rules. We’re doing this. It will be a great night, I promise.”

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At age 15 Kevin joined his parents and the Schaefflein’s for a day trip down to Russ Milner’s second home on the Chesapeake Bay. The three families were active at Saint James Lutheran Church in Philadelphia and the adults were church leaders and good friends.

Craig Schaefflein was in Kevin’s Boy Scout troop based at Saint James and they were good friends. Both were approaching the end of their Boy Scout years but remained close outside the structure of scouting.

Kevin had known Craig well for seven years. He was a sports enthusiast but always undersized and not particularly fast or strong. He played a lot of basketball and baseball and had the smarts to be good tactically, but his physical disadvantage was a constant source of frustration for him. Craig also possessed a strong sense of fairness and knew for himself what was right and wrong. Kevin counted him among his best friends and would step in if Craig was catching some bullying at a scout meeting or a Luther League youth event.

Not long after arriving at the Milner’s that fall Saturday afternoon, Russ proposed that the guys go out for a sail. He had a simple 20 foot daysailer that had a single mast, and he could launch it right off the little beach at this place.

So it was that Craig and his dad George, and Kevin and his dad Bob set out on the Chesapeake Bay with Russ. No one but Russ had any meaningful sailing experience, but the boat was small and Russ had years of experience with it.

Craig and Kevin had some hours with Ray Francis in his sunfish in recent years and could execute the basics of navigating with and against the wind in this smallest and simplest of craft. Capsizing was half the fun in the warm and buoyant waters of the bay in Avalon, New Jersey. A sunfish has only a small foot well and is otherwise sealed and so very easy to right once you blow a tack and dump it over. Just stand on the daggerboard, grab the side edge, lean back, and up she comes. Half the fun. Hop back in and continue your sail.

The crew of five dragged Russ’s daysailer into the cool waters of the Chesapeake, and once all were aboard Russ worked the rudder a bit to propel them further off, and then set the keel board, pivoting it down to vertical and locking it into place, extending some four feet below the hull. The wind was increasing and soon they were racing with the easterly wind well out into the bay, thrilled at the speed of the water rushing by mere inches below the lee side as they leaned back on the windward side to compensate. This was real sailing! And Russ was enjoying his mastery, aggressively reaching for all the speed he could find.

In what felt like very little time they were several miles east into the vast Chesapeake Bay and Russ noted the darkening sky and further increasing winds and decided it was time to come

about and start the process of tacking their way back west to his beach. Coming about involved a bit of training for his novice crew, and soon he had them timing their scramble from one side rail to the other, tucking under the boom as it swung through. Then they'd lean out to further counter as the boat heeled heavily with Russ holding his tack against the wind.

Then came the gust no one expected. The boat heeled still further and Craig fell down into the boat. Now there was less to counter the hard heeling, the boat lurched over further, and Kevin fell in with Craig, with the water rushing past, inches away. Russ released the sail but it was too late. They capsized.

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"It will be a great night, I promise." Kevin's certitude was momentarily derailed by the implications of this apparent offer.

Then these thoughts in rapid fire: "Wait. No! She is promising sex to get me to agree to something really stupid. She clearly has a score to settle with these cadets, and she is looking to put me on the point of her attack. Stupid. The only thing stupider would be actually sleeping with her. Nope! Not happening!"

Then aloud Kevin hissed, "No! No way! I am not into this!"

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The crew of five, all wearing life jackets, were dumped into the Bay. The cold of the water was a shock and they all struggled to stay free of the mainsail and its lines. Once they were gathered and safely swam clear of possible entanglement, Russ set to work righting the boat.

This was 1970, and Russ's daysailer was not designed for self righting. Russ, Bob and George got a foot on the keel board, reached up and hung onto the cap rail, and with all three men leaning back, slowly the mast came up. But the boat was full of water and it just capsized to the opposite side, bringing the mast and sails down on the five. They again freed themselves, swam to the far side, and tried again. If they could right the boat and keep the mast vertical Russ could bail it out and eventually make it home. But the wind still blew, and righting the boat proved difficult.

After four failed attempts they were all nearing exhaustion and losing core temperature fast. The crew clung to the boat, mostly immersed, and hoped to hail a passing craft. All were cold and tired, but Craig was well beyond the others. The smallest, his body temperature was falling fastest. His lips were blue and his teeth chattered uncontrollably.

Long minutes ticked by as Russ watched for a boat close enough to hail. Craig was now in a withdrawn state and began muttering about giving up and letting go. He still wore his floatation

device, but he was giving up, shutting down. The other four saw the danger and bellowed at him to fight the cold and hang on. It seemed a near thing.

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Audrey was drawing within 100 feet of the Academy sloop, circling for an approach to the stern and the sought-after pennant. She was on a mission whether Kevin liked it or not. There was likely a cadet on watch, probably dozing, and any whispering had to be kept quite low. Kevin discovered how difficult it is to make a forceful argument while whispering. And he reckoned that he would take the brunt of any reprisal should they be discovered. Audrey pivoted her dory and began to back Kevin toward the pennant, now 75 feet behind him.

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At age 18 Kevin was a freshman at a small state college in New Hampshire. Late in the spring of 1974 Kevin joined a group of friends from his dorm floor for an afternoon in the sun at Sculptured Rocks, a beautiful place little known to outsiders. This group of eight was led by a few in-state students who had enjoyed the place many times in their high school years.

Formed at the end of the last ice age, the Sculptured Rocks formation was carved into the bedrock by sediment and grit as ice melt flowed into the Cockermouth River on its way to Newfound Lake. Fabulous bowls were formed, each roughly spherical, ranging in size from twenty to forty feet in diameter, with one cascading down into the next, and all of this open to the sky.

This proved a compelling place to sun, drink a few beers, and leap from the bowl ledges into the clear cold waters, ten feet deep on average. It was late in the spring thaw, but the water was still cold enough to keep beer well chilled as it rushed through the curving rock walls.

Young men will jump off heights into water. This is doubly true when young women are present. At least here the water was clear and Kevin could see that the target zone was plenty deep, and free of submerged rocks or logs. After a number of beers had been enjoyed, and well into the afternoon, Kevin stepped to the edge of the deepest bowl. He had made some lesser jumps earlier and was already accustomed to some height and the shock of entering water that had been ice not long ago. This drop would be about fifteen feet into maybe ten feet of water depth. To Kevin's right and down was the eight foot cascade that fed this bowl. Down and to his left was the exiting cascade to the bowl below. Aside from the froth of the entering cascade, the surface water in the bowl, maybe forty feet in diameter, appeared mostly calm.

Two quick steps and a proper leap and Kevin was airborne with a whoop, targeting an entry well away from the wall of the bowl into good deep water. The earlier leaps did little to blunt the numbing shock of the icy water as Kevin's feet drove to the bottom and touched the clean gravel on the bowl's floor before he sprang back to break the surface with another whoop, this one a bit strangled by a diaphragm gone rigid. This was not water to lounge in, but Kevin gamely swam a

few strokes to the far wall, where a current was visible, something of a vortex, thinking it might give him a bit of a ride. And under he went.

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Heedless of Kevin's complaints, Audrey continued to backwater her oars, slowly, silently backing her boat to the transom of the sloop. In moments Kevin would be directly under the pennant.

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Kevin felt himself sucked under the surface by a force of water he had never experienced. He was carried and driven against the underside of a curving rock, his back against it, his submerged view maybe forty-five degrees down to the clean gravel floor of the bowl. And there he stuck, no hope of air. The rock wall surface against his back was a little slick, but also pebbly and grippy, and Kevin was going nowhere. The power of water driving him into the rock was irresistible and relentless.

In moments like this, time loses its dimension. He might have been stuck there only five seconds, or it might have been as much as fifteen. The same force that held him fixed now nudged him a bit to his right. Then a bit more, and he was free, carried to the surface like a cork. He saw several friends about to dive in after him, then saw their relief.

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Kevin could see that Audrey would not be swayed. She wanted her trophy and did not much care what he thought of it. Quickly cataloging the contents of his pockets, there was nothing of value to ruin, and his car key was deep in a front pocket of his shorts and would stay there.

Gripping both sides of the dory in its narrow stern, he vaulted over the port side, slicing into the water toes first. This unexpected move nearly capsized Audrey, but he figured she knew her boat well enough to keep it right. And if not, she certainly had earned her dunking.

A panicky correction with her oars, and more clunking and splashing than she would have liked, and she did indeed remain upright, conscious that the sounds may have roused the night watch, and that she was now alone to face whatever came. She rowed away briskly without incident. And without the pennant.

Kevin found himself buoyed by the calm salt water of the harbor, pleasingly cool, his light summer clothing presenting little weight or drag. He started for shore with an easy, silent breaststroke, then rolled into a sidestroke so he could see both the retreating Audrey and the Academy sloop. All quiet there.

Satisfied that all was well, he switched to the relaxation of the elementary backstroke to make the distance without effort. With head back and ears submerged, he heard the whine of a distant propeller, likely from the far side of the harbor. No threat there. The calm water under a bright moon would bear him home.

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Author's note: Craig Schaefflein survived the Chesapeake episode and enjoyed twenty more years, a marriage and children before heart failure took him.