

# My Father's Legacy

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IT IS STILL DARK WHEN I CRAWL FROM THE tent. Everyone else at camp—my husband, my grown kids and grandchildren, my nieces and their kids—are asleep. Our family camp is a peninsula that juts into a marsh, acres and acres of cattails protected by the wetlands legislation of the 1970s, which means it hasn't changed much since the 1960s when my parents bought the land.

Down at the dock, my sailboat rests on the muddy shore. Leaving my sneakers on the dock, I step into the shallow water, bare feet sinking into muck formed from decades of decayed leaves. I lean into the boat to wedge a travel mug of hot tea into a safe spot. Little frogs jump away at the sound of my splashing. On the dew-covered deck are the muddy footprints of a raccoon. Mosquitoes buzz about my bare thighs as if they've just been served a snack.

As I push the boat into deeper water, hull sliding against mud, the movement startles a water snake, who swims around the stern of the boat, head raised, body wriggling into an s-shape. My father hated snakes, an instinctive reaction, but during more than fifty years of sailing and swimming in this marsh, he learned to live with them. I understand the importance of snakes and their place in the ecosystem, and I can admire them from dock or kayak, but I still don't want a snake brushing against my bare legs.

I wait patiently until the snake reaches the water beyond the dock and then tell myself it's safe to step farther into the water. Of course, I'm just fooling myself by pretending there's only one snake. I am standing at the edge of a marsh simply teeming with snakes. I tell myself not to think about that.

My father designed and built his own small sailboat in his basement, decades ago, a wooden boat he sailed until he was in his eighties. My boat is a melonseed, a beautifully designed catboat with a curved hull.

"That boat has sweet lines," my father said the first time he saw it.

The small melonseed has room for just me and maybe one other person. The rig is simple: one sail tied to a polished wood mast and two wood sprits

that hold the sail taut. The boat my father and I sailed together for many years was eighteen feet long, sometimes carrying our whole family when we kids were little, but my sailboat is just fourteen feet, small enough for me to manage by myself.

I unfurl the sail and slip in the wood sprits that give it shape. The wind bats the sail against cattails, but since I haven't attached the boom sprit to the mainsheet, the beautiful dark red fabric functions as a flag rather than a sail, and the boat doesn't move. By now, I've sunk knee deep in the mud. I grab the edge of the dock to pull myself out and guide the boat to the end of the dock where I sit down to rinse my feet. I don't want to track mud into my pretty boat.

Jumping awkwardly into the sailboat, I push away from the dock. The creek is maybe twenty feet across, with tall cattails on either side and a narrow channel of clear water in the middle. Leaving the sail loose, ducking under the boom sprit, I paddle as fast as I can to keep us in clear water.

Getting a boat out through the marsh is tricky, but it's something I've done with my father since I was a child. On his sailboat, he would often send me to the bow with a paddle. I'm hoping that in just a few years my oldest grandchild will want to join me for a morning sail.

Since I have only two arms, I use a bungee cord to keep the tiller in place. The tiller is the long stick of wood that steers the boat; it's connected to the rudder, which moves back and forth underwater. When my father built his sailboat, he looked up nautical terms and taught them to us kids. It was my mother who taught us the names of the birds and other creatures of the marsh.

As soon as I'm in the clear, I clip the main sheet to the boom sprit. The big red sail fills with wind, and suddenly—I'm sailing. I guide the boat between masses of lily pads and big floating beds of weeds.

This marshy end of the bay is too small for most motorboats, making it a lovely refuge for wading birds, beavers, snakes, and turtles. But the lack of depth means that I begin my sail without a centerboard, and the wind keeps pushing the boat



sideways instead of forward. I guide with the paddle, keeping a careful eye on the rock cliff to my right.

At the mouth of the creek, a great blue heron stands, wings wrapped into a narrow silhouette. She doesn't move as I glide past. A turtle sunning on a cattail root plops back into the water with a soft splash. This shallow, muddy marsh is filled with creatures who swim and crawl and fly, and I like to think that they recognize my silent little sailboat as a kindred spirit as she sweeps past, powered by wind.

Above me is an osprey—a big gray and white bird with a gorgeous long wingspan. He drops straight down, plunging into the water, again and again, then flies off with a fish in his claws. To the west, a local fisherman in a battered aluminum boat is anchored at the mouth of Cranberry Creek. Unlike the osprey, he doesn't seem to be actually catching anything. Some of the local fishermen have three or four generations of knowledge on their side, but the osprey's technique comes from thousands of years honing that evolutionary advantage.

At this hour the river is soft and blue—the sky, the water, and the islands in the distance—that misty blue that is so much easier on the eyes than the harsh sunlight of midday. “I can't take the bright sun,” my father always said, and I have inherited his preference. My hull swishes past lily pads, but the lush white flowers stay tightly closed; they won't open until sun touches them. I work hard to avoid the big mats of floating weeds.

“Those damned weeds,” my father would say in frustration when we sailed together. Thankfully, spawning carp have created clear paths through the mud. Once I make it past the big rock and the last of the weedbeds, I let the centerboard down. The boat begins moving faster, but the tiller feels sluggish. I look back to see a mat of weeds trailing behind us, caught on the rudder.

This is the point at which my father would say, “Here, take the tiller,” and I'd sail the boat while he yanked weeds from the rudder. Alone, I let the boat sail herself as I lay belly-down on the very stern of the boat, sticking my arm into the water to clear the weeds from the rudder, cursing my long hair as it blows about.

“You should cut your hair short,” my father always said when it tangled with the rigging on his boat. But I never did. Long hair is part of me, something that never changes, just like the cattails and shallow mud.

Once I leave the weeds behind, I settle into a comfy spot, a boat cushion beneath me, my back against smooth wood, the tiller in my hand. I pull a pair of old wool socks onto my cold feet before tucking a beach towel over my lap like a blanket. During the hot month of July, it is only in the very early morning that I can experience a chill like this. It is a luxury, or perhaps a gift. I breathe in the fresh air and sip hot tea from the travel mug.

My father never ate during his early morning

sails. He waited until he was back at camp to enjoy a cup of hot coffee or the pancakes with fresh blueberries that my mother always made. But I like eating breakfast on the water, even if it's just hot tea and a slightly squashed muffin.

I can't resist the soft blue light of early morning, so I pull my camera from the dry bag. Taking a photo means holding the tiller with an elbow, the mainsheet held loosely by my bare legs. I remember when I was raising small children, and I'd herd them along with an elbow if my hand wasn't free or nudge them through the door with a hip when I was carrying groceries. There's an intimacy with a small boat as we work together, a relationship of trust.

This is the bay where I first learned to sail with my father more than fifty years ago. To my south and to the north, the ends of the bay are filled with cattails, protected marshes that thrum with a richness of life. To the west, a big rocky island stands between me and the river, an island large enough to hold deer, who graze in the morning light. Along the eastern shore are camps and cottages, some of them quite big and expensive, but all I see this time of day is a dark silhouette. In one of the camps, I imagine, there is a woman sitting with a cup of coffee, taking a few quiet moments to herself before her family wakes up.

I met that woman once, when I was out on a wildflower walk. When I heard that she had a cottage on Goose Bay, I said to her, “I have the little boat with the red sail,” and she knew immediately who I was.

“I've always wondered who the woman with the red sail was,” she said wistfully.

I feel sorry for the folks with the big expensive power boats who head straight out to the deep river and never go near the cattails. I am grateful to my father, who took me on so many early morning sails, and my mother, who taught me to observe the habits of birds and marsh creatures. My parents appreciated the slow, rich life of the marsh.

“Fall off a little, and you'll pick up speed,” my father's voice says inside my head. I push the tiller to turn the boat just a little, and my sailboat responds by moving along faster.

I'm about halfway down the bay when the sun finally rises above the trees on the east shore. Suddenly, I am drenched with warmth. I pull off



image info





the socks to let my toes wiggle in the sunlight. I glide past islands, big chunks of rock with pine trees and little cottages. Sunlight touches the gray rocks, the turned edges of cattails, and the boats tied to docks. The sky turns that vivid purple blue you see only in the early morning.

It is the most beautiful time of day.

To get out to the deep river, I weave through islands I've known since childhood. Tall rock cliffs create a wind shadow, but just a little breeze is all my boat needs to glide along. There is peace in this liminal space between river and bay, where molten silver reflects the rocks, the summer cottages, and pots of red geraniums. I tack carefully to avoid a floating log, but then I realize it's wriggling. A river otter floats on his back, head and belly up, just lounging in the water. River otters always look like they're on vacation. A pair of loons duck under as I pass through. Sun shimmering from the water lights up my beautiful red sail.

I sail past Flat Rock. That's what we called it when we swam there during my childhood. The low gray rock is covered with seagulls, standing still. When I get within a few feet of the rock, the seagulls rise—all of them, all at once—their wings flapping, a lovely graceful dance at which I am the only spectator.

As I make my way through the islands, I tack back and forth—these light winds are tricky—but I know from experience that I just need to make it past the green boathouse on my right.

“That's where the wind will pick up,” my father always said. His words still hold true. When I hit that spot, my sail fills with wind. Suddenly I am flying along, the waves hitting my hull, splashing just a bit.

Before me is the river, wide and blue. I sail upriver so that I won't have to fight the current on my return. A laker goes by in the channel, a huge ship with a red-painted hull, and I turn to catch the deep swells that come in its wake, my boat riding up and down the waves like an amusement park ride.

The sun gets higher. I can tell it is going to be a hot day. At the state park, people stumble out of campers to gather at picnic tables. A couple of speedboats leave the big public dock. The early morning mist disappears, and I pull out sunglasses.

I am getting hungry. I can hear my father's voice in my head, “What do you say? Time to head back?” They were always rhetorical questions as he swung the boat around.

Guiding my little catboat between a couple of rocky islands, I begin the sail home, back to the marsh. Back to the great blue heron feeding at the edge of the creek, the painted turtles swimming in the weed mats, the snake lying in wait to devour a tiny frog, the American bittern that sounds like a plumbing job gone wrong, the acres of green reeds blowing in the wind, thick white water lilies opening to the sun, and family members emerging from the tents for fresh coffee and blueberry pancakes. ❁

