

## Sailing Along

It should have been one of those weekends that my children could look back on recall what a wonderful childhood they had – what a great dad they had been blessed with. After setting up our tent at a public camp-site on the western shore of Lake Erie I announced in a loud, official voice, “Let the fun begin!” My four young rascals squealed and cheered and jumped around. We fished from the pier, splashed around on the beach, tossed plastic horseshoes, and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. The next day we drove over to Sandusky to whoop it up at the big amusement park. It was on our last day that I rented the speed-boat.

Out on the lake, the sunshine lit up our merry lives and the wind swept away our cares. Well, young children on vacation have no cares, and me, I had brought a few brewskis, so I’m not sure how much credit to give *the wind* for our happy-go-lucky spirits.

Without another boat in site we dropped anchor and broke out the rods and tackle. At the back of the boat I alternated between children, baiting hooks and uncrossing lines. But the fun didn’t last long.

“Dad, I’m bored,” said Jason.

“We’ve only been fishing twenty minutes,” I said.

“I’m hot dad, can I take off my life-vest?” asked John. “You’re not wearing yours,” he added.

“No,” I told him.

“I’m hot too, and this vest is uncomtable,” whined Caroline. Jessie was already struggling to take hers off.

“Okay, Okay, you can all take your vests off, but leave them on top of the middle seat here so they are handy in case we need them.”

My wife didn't care for camping, and she deserved a break, so I had been glad to take the parenting helm solo for a three-day weekend. I was, nonetheless, keeping track of all the *dutiful-husband* points I was earning this weekend, and giving some thought as to how I would cash them in with my well-rested and appreciative wife when we got back. But I didn't have much time to daydream; my crew had now declared themselves *done fishing*. I put away the gear, got the kids seated, and perched myself behind the steering wheel to skipper a little joy-ride. *Full throttle*, we skimmed and bounced along the water—they weren't bored now.

John stood up and shouted, "Faster dad, go faster!"

"Stay in your seat," I yelled back, and slowed the boat until he sat back down.

When we resumed full speed I made a few sharp turns, to everyone's great excitement. Somehow Caroline, one of our 6-year-old twins, fell overboard. I stopped the boat and dove in to save her; she wasn't more than twenty yards away. As I swam towards Caroline, John, who had just turned eight, jumped in to help. Jason, the other twin, followed John. And Jessie, our 4-year-old, started crying, but would not be left alone—she plopped right in too.

I reached Caroline and grabbed hold of her. I turned to do a confident one arm side stroke back to the boat when I saw the others; Jessie had just made her leap. The full gravity of the situation struck me in less than an instant. With the remainder of that first instant—I found religion, prayed for help, held Caroline tight in one arm and began kicking and stroking one-handed with all my might. When I looked forward again, I realized I might not make it to the others in time, and the boat was drifting away.

"John!" I yelled, he was the only one who could sort-of swim, "Swim to the boat John, and throw over the life preservers."

John thrashed towards the boat. When he swallowed a big mouthful of water he panicked. His arms began flailing; he turned and headed back toward the rest of us. It didn't matter; the boat was drifting away faster than his feeble dog paddle would have taken him.

When I reached Jason and Jessie, Jessie was already underwater. I pulled her up, she was coughing and spitting out water. I held Jason and Jessie in one arm and Carolyn in the other. In spite of how hard I was kicking we began bobbing under. "Daddy do something," cried Jessie in-between sobs and gags.

John made it back to us and leached his arms around my neck. I could not possibly keep us all afloat. There seemed to be only one thing to do: I believed I could carry one child with me and swim to the boat. Maybe John could tread water long enough to stay above water until I whipped the boat back here, but I doubted it. Whichever other two I left behind would be doomed for sure.

But there was no other way to keep any of us alive. I considered which child to take with me, which meant I was considering which ones would be left to die. The decision made itself. I would not swim away from anyone. We would all go down together.

"Everyone hold on tight," I hollered. "Don't let go."

My legs were giving out. "I love you children. John, Caroline, Jason, Jessie, I love you."

"I love you Daddy."

"I love you Daddy."

Amid the coughing, spitting, crying and screaming, we went under together, our arms locked around each other. Sharp pain clutched our lungs. Deep under the dark water, we lost consciousness. One by one, we involuntarily let go as we sank further down and apart forever, while up above our boat ambled around uselessly and the sun continued to glimmer across a dreamy lake.

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My children, my children, my precious little metaphors. For those of you readers who are thinking what a terrible and irresponsible parent I am, I will wait no longer to tell you that it was not my children I couldn't save but my books. The four fledgling books that I am trying to write: the historical novel, the sci-fi thriller, the book of poems, and the book of short stories. The four books that I hope to nurture to maturity so that one day, bound between two sturdy hard covers, they can venture off into the world and hold their own.

But I am an amateur writer who is no longer young. I can't possibly finish four books. I could finish one book, I believe, if I focused all my efforts on a single book and cast the others aside. But that's not the way I roll. We're all going down together.

THE END

*Post Script:* It occurred to me after I wrote this story—"I should write my memoirs." A fifth book! So please go back in your minds and add a new-born infant to the boat, one who winds up in the lake with the rest of us: a beautiful, innocent, little angel whom I cannot possibly ignore.