

VOYAGE TO THE VINEYARD
by Joe Forbrich

If I'd known then what I know now, I never would have done it. But I didn't know. So I did it.

It's time to shove off. I'm at the boat ramp on Red Creek Road in Hampton Bays, sneaking my sixteen foot sailboat into the water without a permit. I've spent six months building the thing out of repurposed materials, because I like being clever and saving money. "Repurposed Materials" is defined as anything that makes you say, "Hey...I can use that for my boat!" My mast was once a wooden flagpole. The spokes on my steering wheel, the turned posts of a baby's crib. The rudder, an old floorboard. A nice wide one from a demolished barn in Manorville.

I have a job waiting for me across the water. Two, actually: acting in a theatre at night and learning to build boats by day. Perhaps I should have learned to build boats *before* I went and built one, especially one that I am about to sail from Long Island to Martha's Vineyard, but as Uncle Johnny says, "Sometimes you just have to jump off the cliff and build your wings on the way down."

I was inspired by a book about Gannon & Benjamin, a world-renowned boatbuilding shop on the Vineyard. I had worked at my boat pretty much full-time since I was fortunate to be getting residual checks from a small recurring role on *Law & Order*, and I could afford not to work another job. I wrote to Nat Benjamin (the Robert DeNiro of boatbuilders) and offered to work at Gannon & Benjamin for free. He wrote back and said, "Your offer is gratefully accepted." Next I had to secure a living arrangement there. My friend Tonye told me there was an excellent live theatre on the Island, and they were auditioning in New York City for a play about the Tuskegee Airmen. The Vineyard Playhouse needed an actor to play the flight instructor for a six-week engagement. I auditioned and got the part, along with a small salary and a large bedroom in the house of a nineteenth-century ship's captain. Now all I had to do was get to Martha's Vineyard. Most people take a bus from the city to Wood's Hole on Cape Cod and then catch the ferry to the Island. But not me.

I have six weeks' worth of clothes and a week's worth of food and supplies stuffed into the four-by-six-foot cabin, as well as maps, GPS, compass, marine radio, journal, rain gear, cell phone, tools, binoculars, Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book, spare parts, inflatable dinghy, plus a spare bamboo pole, since I'd fashioned the spars for the boat from bamboo that I found growing in Flanders. I also carry a five-gallon bucket and will stretch plastic grocery bags across the opening for my toilet. I

have just enough space left over for sleeping. Little did I know that all this extra weight would later be the added ballast I needed to save my life.

With my heart in my mouth and a lump in my throat, I kiss my wife goodbye. “See you soon. I hope.” She doesn’t think it’s funny. My plan is to sail with the prevailing southwest wind, northeast into a harbor idyllically named Vineyard Haven. The distance is a hundred and twenty miles as the crow flies. My cruising speed is four miles an hour. I hope to take four days but allow myself seven. I should have allowed ten. Boats are not crows.

There is only a breath of wind today. I choose to see this is a good thing. I’m still learning the ropes, so to speak. I’d received a half-scolding lesson on how to read the Eldridge Tide Charts from Doctor Ferrigno, the local veterinarian. He as much as said, “Look, you’re an idiot to be sailing on the ocean in such a tiny homemade boat, but since you’re too stubborn to be talked out of it, I might as well give you a fighting chance.” He showed me how to use tidal currents in my favor, and how to avoid being sucked into hell.

My first day consists of sitting motionless for hours, baking in the sun, the only sailboat on the entire windless Peconic Bay. At least Dr. Ferrigno’s tide is on my side, spiring me toward my destination at roughly a quarter mile per hour. A puff of wind picks up as night finally approaches and I drop anchor in the lee of Robins Island.

The next morning brings more of the same. No wind. Little progress. And it’s not like I can just power up the outboard. All I have for artificial propulsion is an oar and a little electric eggbeater of a motor. I have maybe an hour of juice in the car battery under the cockpit seat, and even then it only pushes the boat at two miles an hour. I breakfast on a can of sardines and wait for the wind.

The wind doesn’t come. But an outgoing tide sucks me through the bottleneck between Shelter Island and the North Fork, a zigzag maze of mansions and marshes as I am ushered through by the current. A great white heron fishes on tiptoe with the concentration of a chess master. A bunch of kids on an oversize inflatable raft point and laugh at my workaday vessel. A ferry zooms by with little regard for the wake it creates. I yearn for open water.

Until I actually *get* to open water. There’s a stretch of sand on the southern tip of the North Fork called Long Beach. This is the last leg before I reach the northern tip of Long Island at Orient Point, and the first time I feel the full force of the ocean. Out here, the South Fork is too far away to staunch the momentum of the waves marching up from the south and crashing onto the beach.

And because I'm close to shore, the water is shallower. The wind really begins to blow. This is a recipe for huge, scary breaking waves, and it's a recipe being cooked up right now. In my mind I replay how Uncle Johnny rebutted my fears: "Of *course* that boat can handle the ocean! That's what it's designed for! It's copied after the Friendship Sloop! Those goddam things went out in *all* kinds of weather! Look at the shape of that bow! It parts the water like the Red Sea!"

And he's right. As I face these six-foot, white-capped walls of water head on, lest I broach and tip over sideways, my little boat is pointing almost straight up, and when the bow crashes back down into the valley of the next wave, it splays the water away and then bobs back up in time for the next wave. This is amazing! What a design! I'm getting the hell out of here!

I turn back for home. There is no way I'm going into open sea in a homemade boat against these evil waves. What was I thinking? My polytarp sails are attached with shower curtain rings, for chrissake! I'll just take the bus to Woods Hole and then the ferry to Martha's Vineyard. There's no shame in this. My friends and family are worried as it is. Why do I distress them so? I'm being selfish. They'd much rather have me around a few more years than find my little boat lying crumpled and broken on the shores of Long Beach, atop my crumpled and broken body. No one's going to think any less of me. Discretion is, after all, the better part of valor.

Going *with* the waves is much easier as I surf back toward home. So easy in fact that I take a deep breath and turn around. I'm sailing to Martha's Vineyard, damn it. And I shall arrive in triumph. If I can just get through *this*.

The waves are taller than I am now and they continue in rapid succession. The boat is a breathless, foaming, heaving horse, barely clearing each relentless hurdle: leap/splash, leap/splash, leap/splash. I am not sailing. I am rodeo riding.

This is crazy. A larger boat wouldn't be forced deal with this crap. That settles it. I've tried twice. I've done all that I can to prove that I can't. I can't. I can't do it.

I slide back toward home on the face of the massive waves. But again, I can't do it. I can't. I can't face the failure of quitting so early on. I swing the boat back into the angry wind one more time because I'd rather die than catch the bus. The bow does that sickening upward tilt again, threatening a reverse somersault as the boat plows onward, upward, and oftentimes backward. I fight the instinct to sail toward shore. What have I gotten myself into?