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Crabbing, Culling, Repeat

"You'll get used to the smell," Chris Rhodes says with a crooked smile, almost apologizing and already assuming my reaction. The twenty-year-old native Southern Marylander stands tall at six-one with a big build; his shoulders and arms filling his sweatshirt. His messy brown hair is tucked under a stocking hat and hood, above cool blue eyes. Chris picks me up at one o'clock to talk about a usual day in the life of a crabber. He wears an old gray hoodie and his oil skins – basically waterproof overalls – tucked into thick rubber boots. His sweatshirt and sweatpants are soaking when he peels off the bib. "I wear through them pretty quick. So, the water still soaks through."

The prime season to catch crabs starts at the end of spring, runs through summer, and ends as fall sets in. Watermen make most of their money from crabs. Maryland is famous for their Maryland Blue crabs. They are enjoyed by natives and visitors alike. Blue crabs are found up and down the coast from Nova Scotia to Uruguay, but what makes Maryland crabs the best is the natural buttery taste that can only be found in those waters. They are the hottest commodity in the Chesapeake Bay and bring in millions of dollars each year. These last few weeks of crabbing are crucial for the watermen. The money they make needs to last all winter until the next season.

Chris and his father try to take me out on the boat to show me how it's done, but the weather isn't cooperating and going out early doesn't help to beat the conditions. Usually, they get up before the sun so they will be setting out on the water right as the sun is rising.

"In the summer, it's good to beat the sun. It gets way too hot out there," Chris says. "We have a cover above us, but even the water is glaring. It burns my eyes. In the winter, I prefer the

sun. It helps a little with warmth, but that wind is brutal. It cuts right through you." He adds with a shiver.

I look out to see the familiar blue tarp covering the boat gone. The rectangular wooden frame seems to hover above the skiff boat. The trees in the yard leading to the water bend with a gust of wind. The wind is something to be wary of out on the water. All watermen know they must pay close attention to the weather. Things can pick up quickly on the water, changing your luck drastically.

The Saturday before I travel to St. Mary's County, there is a fishing competition. However, an incoming storm cuts the competition short. Four men don't make it back in time. By evening, the Coast Guard starts the search. A warning to all local residents is sent out Sunday morning. They ask everyone to search under their piers, on their beaches, and anywhere they can for the missing bodies. Two bodies are found on one of the crabber's lines. One man hangs on the edge of the boat, fifty-two miles from where they were last seen. All night he battled the huge waves, wind, and freezing water to stay on top of the capsized boat, his only beacon of hope in the pitch black night. The Coast Guard rushes him to the hospital, where he still rests as I show up for my first day. The search continues for the last remaining fisherman, pretending hope isn't wavering after three long, cold days. Soon after the Coast Guard take a break from the search.

Chris carries his mother's last name, but his father is a Swann. The family name carries the small town fame. A time capsule, starting in 1920, highlights the Swanns' history in Piney Point. Their mark starts as a general store and quickly turns into a hotel and restaurant. Each family member has their own interests they bring to the family business. Chris's grandfather introduces crabbing and the trade sticks.

I sit with Chris and his father, “Little Rick,” at the table in Chris’s apartment. The accident doesn’t need an introduction in the conversation; even I know the reason for the somber atmosphere.

“Wind must’ve picked up real quick,” Chris says, half explaining to me, half thinking out loud. “All could’ve changed in five minutes. The waves picked up and got too big; they started filling the boat.”

“I’m scared of finding a dead body out there.” Chris’s father replies with a country slur. Little Rick Swann is of the same build and tanned, leather skin, but his graying hair is a growing buzz cut. “It must have been an awful way to go, like being in a washing machine. Did you know they found the two bodies on mine, or your granpa’s, or Jim’s line? I don’t wanna pull up the last one. You know the crabs got to it.”

The fishermen’s names are not released to the public, but St. Mary’s is a small county. It doesn’t take long for the watermen to talk and figure out it’s a crew from Breton Bay, a ten to fifteen minute ride away by boat or car. They figure wind brought them around the peninsula and down the river by St. George’s Island. The fishermen are a well-known crew, with a few other fishing competition wins under their belts. The accident and the crew’s experience is a reminder to all that they can never get too comfortable on the water. For the next few days, no boats leave their docks as the crabbers wait until the gale dies down.

In good weather, Chris rotates between his grandpa one day and his dad the next. Chris’s grandfather, “Big Ricky,” is ironically smaller than the other two. He is a tough, country man that shows his experience with the way he talks. He looks the part with a flannel shirt tucked into

his jeans and work boots. He tells me that he's crabbed on and off all his life, which only makes him love it even more.

"I learned on my own. It's something you kinda pick up. But I learned from watching people. I wasn't doing it for a living. I always had something else. I quit work because I got old, but I wasn't old enough. I wanted something to do. Something to do that I can do," Big Ricky smiles revealing his new dentures after his last tooth was pulled over the summer.

He quickly adds that he would always crab when he could, even while managing Swann's, a family-owned hotel, bar, store, and marina that was famous in the area. I remember the summer day long ago when that ended. The bright blue sky is clear and it is early in the day. Almost out of nowhere, a dark gray, almost black, cloud begins filling the sky. The air grows smoky and my family realizes it's a fire. My grandpa runs out of the house and herds my dad and brother in the car so they could try to help.

Chris tells me after we leave his grandfather, "After Swann's burned, he managed three different Food Lions, which helped him retire, but hated it and turned back to crabbing. Crabbing keeps him busy so he doesn't lose his mind."

Big Ricky and Little Rick are the captains of their own boats. The captain's job is to steer the boat straight and to stay on course where all their pots are lined up. Each buoy signifies the location of a crab pot. The buoys are painted based on the owners. The Swann's buoys are painted orange for the grandfather, and orange with a black stripe for the father. The captains grab their buoys with a boat hook and set the rope in the winder, which reels in the pots. Big Ricky warns to watch out for the winder. His finger got caught in the winder before and messed

it up for a long time. After they take out the bait, the captain hands the pot to Chris. Then, he opens the door and shakes out the crabs on a cull box.

"If they don't come out then I find something long to poke them with, like a PVC pipe, that white plastic pipe that you may see under the sink, that's what we use." Chris looks for an extra pipe to show me. He doesn't begin talking again until he's satisfied I know what he's talking about. "Then I close the door and rebait it. Then wait for the OK to throw it back overboard. While we are on the way to the next pot, I measure the crabs and categorize them. And repeat. And repeat. And repeat."

Chris turns back to the cull box. Culling is the term watermen use for sorting. Right out of the water, crabs must undergo a few tests before they are chosen. First, by gender. I already know a couple easy ways to differentiate the two that I learned as a kid. The claws of a female crab are bright red like nail polish, or lipstick; that's the easy way to remember they're girls. The underside of crabs has a shape – an apron. Males' show a thin, pencil-like shaped apron, while females are thicker. Female crabs are a little more confusing than males to sort.

"Females, they don't have to be a certain size; they just have to be sexually mature," Chris explains. "When they're not sexually mature their apron is white and a thinner, triangular shape. And when they are mature, the shape is a capitol dome shape and it turns black, not white. We'd get a ticket for keeping pregnant ones so we don't keep those. They're called sponge crabs and they have a sponge-like material coming out of their apron, either orange or brown, it could be either."

Male crabs are sorted based on their size and the hardness of their shell. There are two categories for them. The number one males have the hardest shells and they must be over five and a quarter inches from the point to point, not including the legs. The number twos are not as

hard, but they aren't soft or squishy, and they're not as heavy. They still have to be at least five and a quarter inches, though. Chris has to finish culling each of the crabs before they get to the next buoy. He repeats this process until he completes the pots, which can be between 250 to 600 pots a day.

The pair pull in the day's winnings and count how many bushels of each category they have to sell. A bushel of crabs depends on the type of crab. For this time of the year, a bushel now consists of four to five dozen decent crabs. By afternoon, they are ready to sell seven bushels to their usual buyer.

Chris drives a silver-blue pickup filled with wooden baskets of crabs; each basket holds one bushel. We're headed to the tip of St. George's Island in Southern Maryland. We pull up to what I can only describe as a boat graveyard – a backyard filled with old pieces of boats, fishing gear, and hundreds of crab pots.

"The males are on my side and the sooks, or females, are on yours." Chris says as he turns around to back into a white building. "Funny how they lined up with us."

The door to the cooler looks heavy and has a big master lock and deadbolt. The inside is heavily insulated to keep the crabs cool and moist. Chris heaves the baskets and stacks them on a dolly to roll them in the cooler. The crabs are packed tightly together; each basket weighing about forty to fifty pounds. The only signs of life come from the twitching legs sticking out of the cracks.

"I needa grab some new baskets and lids before we're on our way. Dennis usually leaves them in another shed." Chris says, sealing the cooler once more. We drive to a small, wooden shed. The door, completely off its hinges, leans against all the crabbing equipment spilling out of

the doorway. Chris effortlessly lifts the door out of the way and begins sifting through the piles of wooden baskets and lids, trying to find sets in good shape.

Dennis is the owner of DNS Seafood and purchases the crabs from the crabbers. He pays around eighty dollars per bushel for males, a hundred dollars max. The same crabs sell for $150 in a restaurant or store and steamed they're closer to $200.

"Compared to what people pay for it over the table and what we get, there's a big gray area of where all the money goes," Little Rick comments.

Little Rick hasn't been crabbing in a few days, Chris tells me. He and Dennis are in an argument over the crabs. Dennis owns the boat and pots that Little Rick uses to crab and expects half the money Little Rick makes to go to him. Little Rick hasn't been catching enough crabs to make the work worth it, so he's waiting until the argument blows over. There is no other way for him to crab or make money from it. Chris and Big Ricky also avoid the question of going somewhere new.

"Oh no, I never sell my crabs to my friends or anything. Sometimes I'll save a couple of bushels for my wife, but I won't sell them to other people, only to Dennis." Big Ricky sits awkwardly on his couch, quiet after introductions, waiting until he is spoken to. He pets his old, gray shih tzu, Katie, as the football highlights play in the background. "See, once I start selling the decent crabs to friends and only the trash ones to Dennis then he'll stop selling my crabs. Then he'll stop buying my crabs. Then I'll be out of luck. It's all about loyalty."

What Big Ricky describes sounds more like a dictatorship than a seafood business to me, but it makes sense. Restaurants will not purchase bushels from the crabbers directly; if they do then they are pickier with the crabs. Dennis has formed a relationship with the businesses; his

connections make it easy for him to sell to them. The crabbers have no other choice but to keep him as the middleman and sell to him.

The Chesapeake Bay Program brags the crab population has increased 142 million since last winter, but the crabbers in Southern Maryland still feel the decline from years earlier.

"Yeah, they've declined in numbers a lot." Little Rick says. "Let's see, when I was twenty-one years old, I'm forty-one so twenty years ago, we'd catch eighty to a hundred baskets of females. Now the limit is fourteen, but I only hit my limit a few times. They have come back in the last ten years. The regulations have brought them back. The limits help. Five years ago, there was too many crabs, which hurt in another way. Once there's too many crabs trying to be sold you don't get much for 'em. You get that? They done away with the regulations so it dwindled down, but now that its back it should come back better."

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources Fishery Service (MDNRFS) is the government agency that keeps track of the population and regulations. The increase in pollution, over-crabbing, and habitat loss has made these regulations even more critical. Every crabber must hold a license to set crab pots, catch them, and sell them. The state gives a set number of the amount of bushels the crabber is allowed to catch based on their license. For commercial crabbing, there are large licenses and smaller licenses. Little Rick has the larger license, which allows him to have 600 pots in the water. It gives him the ability to catch fourteen bushels of female crabs. Big Ricky has 250 pots, which allows him to catch nine bushels of females at this time of the season.

"That's the MDNRFS. You see?" Big Ricky surprises me by pulling out an iPhone. He shows me the automated texts from the department. "They send us messages and everything to

remind us how many bushels we can catch. It's good or else I'm sure people will forget or act like it."

Taking more crabs than allowed is an issue that goes almost completely unnoticed. There are very few coastguard or police boats that patrol the water. Occasionally the coastguard may search boats for any violations, but it is not as often as some crabbers think is necessary.

"Now people are taking more and more and more. People stealing from the pots is a big problem. You got your recreational people and then commercial who know when you crab and that you can't afford to watch the pots. It's easy to get away with." Little Ricky shakes his head, running his hand through his hair.

Watermen run into many more problems in their line of work. Their job is rough, which means the equipment takes quite a beating. If it's not the crab pots that need repairing, then it's the steering on the boat or the motor breaking down. To them, it's not a matter if something will break down, it's when. And if it's not the waterman's equipment, it's his body.

The work takes a toll on everyone's bodies no matter how much they are used to it. Talking to the Swanns, I can see the long and short term effects from the labor. Chris's hands reveal the danger of crabs' claws and shells. He wears thick rubber gloves, yet the sharp shells still poke through. His hands carry cuts of all sizes and pricks that remind me of the puncture wounds I once had when I learned how to sew.

"One time, Pops got a point that broke off in his hand and got infected," Chris says shaking off my concern over his own scratches.

Chris talks about the feeling of being constantly sore and exhausted. Sometimes they will go for over a week without a day off. The exhaustion begins to take over.

"My body gets so weak. It's like I can't control it." Chris admits to accidentally falling asleep more times than he can remember.

Sore muscles and exhaustion are only some of the short term injuries crabbers face. Injuries over the years begin popping up and continue for the rest of their lives. Big Ricky has a bad shoulder that has gotten worse. He can't do any of the physical labor anymore, so he relies on Chris to take care of the lifting. Chris is already starting to feel the strain in his knees and shoulders. The back holds a lot of the pain, too. There's a lot of bending over in crabbing, whether it's for picking up a buoy or picking up heavy baskets. Big and Little Rick can attest to the constant feeling of pain they carry, although they can't imagine it any other way.

In Southern Maryland, many crabbers don't know anything else besides crabbing. They grow up surrounded by watermen and automatically pick up the trade.

"My first job crabbing was fifth grade, maybe ten, but I was too young. I wasn't strong enough to squeeze the crabs. I got a job the next year. I prolly wasn't strong enough the second year, but I faked it." Little Rick laughs. He mentions a time when he tried drilling wells, but it wasn't long before he went back to the water. "I just really liked it. You learn how to do it. Nobody's over top of you. No one to say do this, do that. The freedom of it is my favorite."

Crabbing seems to be one of the harder but preferred jobs. There are few job options for people in this town. Most kids graduate high school or turn eighteen and they are immediately expected to figure out their lives. Some may be lucky and can continue to live at home while they find a job and start saving up, possibly while taking classes at a community college. Others find a job and move out, still trying to figure out the balance of an adult life but wanting to be a part of the carefree college years. Chris can relate to this part of life, but his story is unique.

Chris tells me about living with his mom in Florida for the first half of senior year. He quickly becomes the grownup in the family. Most students at that age start to apply to college and plan their future careers. Chris finds little time – or drive – for homework. His focus revolves around taking care of his two younger siblings, figuring out how to get the family out of the streets, and avoiding the harmful drugs that cross his path.

At seventeen, he runs away, back to St. George's Island. Big Ricky takes him in and teaches him the life of a waterman. Chris picks up a second job so he can move out of his grandparents' house. His dad asks him to help with crabbing every now and then, and eventually it becomes routine.

"It's cool because I get to be really close with them, like I never had before. It's a different type of relationship that goes farther than family." Chris's piercing eyes tell me how important this is to him. "We're spending all that time on the water together. It's like an unspoken understanding. You sorta learn to work like a machine together. You know when the other person needs help without them saying anything. With no words about work, more about anything else in life. We talk about whatever is going on, whatever else is on our mind. Could be deep, could be simple."

Although it is impossible to make up for lost time, Chris credits crabbing to the reason why the relationship with his father is so much stronger. Chris was born when his parents were twenty years old, his age now. Young Chris only sees his dad occasionally. The visits are random; sometimes he just stops by, other times he takes Chris to his grandparents' house for the holidays. For a couple months, Little Rick would come by every week to take him fishing or crabbing, but one week he stops showing up. Neither contacted the other. Chris starts to meet his dad again after he turns twelve years old, right after moving back to St. Mary's County from

Florida for the first time. He admits that the relationship with Little Rick wasn't always good, but the pair have gotten past that at this point. I can see how close they are by the way they joke with each other.

"My dad is more hip to the pop station. He screams all the words, especially Adele. Can't sing a lick though, that's the unfortunate part," Chris laughs.

We can't see the sun setting from Chris's living room window, but the clouds reflect the colors of it. The two of us sit in silence a moment longer before Chris turns back to me seriously.

"But what I have really come to love about crabbing is it's taught me to be much more innovative. Realizing that there is way more than one way to do anything. Things don't always work out the way you intended, but with determination and an original mind, a solution can be found."

Chris plans on trying out classes at his local community college in the spring. He knows he wants to find later classes so he can continue crabbing in the mornings with his dad and grandpa.

"I feel a sense of loyalty because they're all I really have. They support me trying to get out. They want me to make something bigger of myself," Chris says.

He appreciates everything his family has done for him and the opportunities he has been given and intends to help them in return. Chris tells me about his dream to make a better life for his future family, as well. Being by the water is important, but they would be his number one focus for a while. His love for the water hasn't diminished though. Chris plans on staying close to the water as long as he can. If not, he knows he'll come back to it like Big Ricky has done time and time again; it's in his blood after all.

As the days follow, I continue checking the news for the lost fisherman at sea. The Coast Guard give up the search. The reports stop, writing off the news as another sailor lost at sea. Chris, Little Rick, and Big Ricky begin pulling up their crab pots, calling it quits until the spring.