

# Crab Cakes

with **Kenny**

BY MICHAEL GRAFF

A lifetime of lessons learned from my little brother leads to the best, most hopeful breakfast we ever shared.

**W**E WERE DOWN at the creek one summer morning when my brother, Kenny, plucked a blue crab from the live box and hollered, "PAPER SHELL!" He twirled twice and flung the crab as hard

as he could back toward the water. We watched it spin like a Frisbee with claws, pincers out wide and snapping helplessly for something familiar as it soared over grass and then mud and then the planks of our family's pier. What my brother meant, in his own way, is that the flying crab had just started molting, meaning it was at a stage in its life when its shell was not quite hard and not quite soft, a stage when it has virtually no meat or culinary value, a stage when a crab really should be back in the water, whether under its own power or by the toss of a Tasmanian 7-year-old.

The paper shell helicoptered through the air for about 40 feet, and, in a twist of bad luck that could only happen to my brother, our father

happened to be standing on the pier directly in the crab's flight path. There's nothing dull about the edge of a crab, so Dad needed a big towel and bandages on his forehead for weeks. But before he knew he was bleeding, he shouted a sentence I heard over and over in my childhood: "Damn it, Kenneth Frederick!"

My father's first and middle names, by the way, are Carl Frederick. I could almost hear him processing the irony as he shouted: Here he'd gifted that middle name to his second son, and the little punk—another name he sometimes called Kenny—hit him with a rotten crab. They had the best relationship. Kenny would jump off a roof or race a go-kart into a fence post or sled down a steep hill into a tree, and Dad would tell his friends, "Yep, boy's gonna kill himself before he's 10."

He's my younger brother by two and a half years, but Kenny has always known something I never could: what it's like to not fear consequences. We were competitive brothers and still are, but beating him in anything was almost more trouble

**UP THE CREEK**  
The author (right) with his brother, Kenny, near the family's cottage in St. Mary's County, Maryland.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MICHAEL GRAFF

than it was worth. He once got mad during a backyard baseball game and tossed a ladder at my best friend. He never lost a board game, not because he was good at them but because when things looked bleak he'd flip the board and leave the pieces scattered across the room.

The boy is otherwise brilliant, though. He became salutatorian of his high school class without studying, coasted through college, and now, as a project manager for a big construction company, builds complicated things like a 27-dome mosque that just opened near Baltimore. He wrote a story about that project for *Concrete International* and now jokes that he's the more accomplished writer in the family. "I co-authored this touching, emotional tale of constructing a concrete building," he bragged on Facebook.

With every outburst or fearless jump, the youngest member of our little family always seemed to teach us a basic rule of life that should've been obvious anyway. Take the toss of that paper-shell crab. First lesson: Always pay attention, Dad. Second: A crab's only as good as the amount of meat in it.

I think of that story when I eat crab cakes these days. I haven't lived in Maryland since leaving

for college, and I've spent most of the past 18 years in North Carolina, a perfectly fine state that, believe it or not, produces more crabs than Maryland some years. Why is Maryland known as the Crab State? I can only imagine it's because people here were so busy arguing over what kind of sauce to put on barbecue that they let Maryland scoop them on the greatest seafood marketing campaign on the East Coast. North Carolina wound up adopting the red drum as its state fish. That's not nearly as sexy, but one of the red drum's favorite foods is blue crab. So take that, Maryland.

I live in Charlotte, a thriving city with a booming restaurant scene and dozens of fantastic chefs who can screw up a crab cake with the best of them. It usually goes like this: The waitress will say, "Our crab cakes are the best I've ever had," and I won't be able to help myself. Then the plate will come, and the crab cake will be shaped like a hockey puck. It'll have green vegetables dotting its surface—peppers or celery or something ridiculous. Don't get me wrong; these things are great on their own, but mixing green peppers and celery into your crab cake is like mixing college term papers in with the Pulitzer pile.

The reason folks down here

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add all that filling, of course, is that crab meat is expensive. Crab harvest totals have plummeted in recent years. There are dozens of theories as to why, but let's just pick the one that'll be popular in any state: It's the government's fault. Regional and state fishery commissions have set strict regulations to protect the red drum. In the past 15 years, the population has more than doubled. Good for the red drum. But here's the thing: the more red drum, the smaller the crab harvest, the more expensive the crab meat, the more green peppers and celery I seem to find in my crab cakes. The circle of life.

The worst crab cake I ever ate was a deep-fried mess at a restaurant on the North Carolina coast. This is a state that will deep-fry Oreos and ice cream at the state fair, and I get how that can be funny, but deep-frying a crab cake is sick humor I'll never understand.

All of those bad crab cake memories do one thing, however—they make the good ones better. I can't remember the first crab cake I ever ate, but I will never forget the best one.

**T**HE THING ABOUT BREAKFAST of any kind is that it marks the start of something. Breakfast is optimism, Christmas Eve, a first date, the bugle at the Kentucky Derby.



**SUPPORTING CAST** Kenny fishing the creek with his great-uncle.

But nothing can exist without something existing before it, and today's breakfast was born in fields and rivers and chicken coops yesterday.

The best breakfast I ever had was born after a love connection between "doubblers," a term I learned before I ever sat through a sex ed class. When we were very young, Dad would take us down to a cottage on a creek in St. Mary's County, Maryland, near where

the Patuxent River meets the Chesapeake Bay. The cottage sat on a hill and had been in the family for years. My father's younger brother, George, lived there with his wife and daughter. On those mornings Dad would yank life jackets over our heads and plop us on the bench seats of a green johnboat, and we'd ride around snatching crabs from any pole we could find—pilings for navigational signs, pillars of other people's

piers. Back then, Maryland waters were well stocked, so nobody minded if you took a few from their poles. Sometimes the owner would see us and wave, knowing the next crab would soon latch on. We only kept very big crabs; the size limit is 5 inches from one tip of the shell to the other. We wouldn't dare keep a female crab. You can take crabs from the water, we believed, but you better leave some for tomorrow. (If you don't know the difference between male and female crabs, here's how I was taught, word for word: Look at the apron. If it looks like the Washington Monument, it's a male; if it looks like the Capitol Building, it's a female.)

On some poles, we'd come across a male cradling a female—they do this to protect the females as they molt—and either Kenny or I would say, "Oh, doubblers," and we'd scoop both in the act and throw the female back.

Of all the things a Maryland childhood gave me, an understanding of crabs has proven to be one of the most useful. Ask any of my exes, and they'll say that my crab knowledge was one of the reasons they fell in love with me. Crabs are mean-looking, with their raised claws and snapping pincers, but you can neutralize one by grabbing it where its back fin meets the hard shell. You can hold it for hours like this without being pinched. If you're a young man showing a young woman this trick, in my experience it's worth three or four extra dates. Then there's the feast: Understanding how to open a crab is impressive to a woman from, say, the Midwest—and although I wound up divorced from a woman from, say, the Midwest, even she'll admit that she's a better person for learning how to unlock the sweet chunks of delicate meat.

They are beautiful creatures. In fact, in 1976 William Warner wrote *Beautiful Swimmers*, a book

about crabs and the people who catch them, and it won the Pulitzer Prize. Back fins always paddling, front claws always at the ready, crabs are constantly in search of a comfortable spot in the mud. They exist in waters that are both salty and fresh. Early in life they subsist as larvae near the ocean, a salty place, migrating toward cleaner waters as they mature.

Two places that offer the best homes are Chesapeake Bay and the rich sounds of eastern North Carolina—large aquatic bodies where saltwater is constantly driving in from the Atlantic Ocean and meeting the freshwater from rivers. Density directs traffic in these estuaries, freshwater on top and saltwater on bottom. In the Chesapeake, the majority of the freshwater flows down from New York and Pennsylvania, riding the Susquehanna, one of the oldest rivers in the world. The river was here before the bay, and its ancient path forms the "channel" of the Chesapeake, a 100-foot-deep section that runs through the middle of the bay and allows for larger ships to cruise to the Port of Baltimore.

We got stuck in that channel once when Dad's charter boat died. A broken boat is a problem anytime, but it was a bigger problem that day because we looked up and saw the bow of the Queen Elizabeth 2 pointed directly at us. Nine-hundred-sixty-three feet long, 171 feet high. I learned then that boat captains actually do use the word "Mayday!" Eventually someone aboard the big ship answered Dad's call on the radio and adjusted the autopilot setting to veer around us. An hour or so later, a pilot boat came out to tow us home. With nothing better to do, we cast a couple of lines off the back of Dad's dead boat during the ride. Kenny snagged a bluefish.

"You lucky little punk," my father said to him.

**W**HEN HE WAS VERY young, Kenny had a speech impediment. He couldn't finish his Rs or flap an L to save his life. "Paper shell!" was actually "Paypaw Shehw!" He received years of speech therapy for that. When his words finally cleared up, his adult teeth started coming in with an overbite. Then he was diagnosed with 20/100 vision and made to wear a pair of thick glasses. Toss in Brillo Pad

hair. The boy's middle school days were brutal.

He started high school the year I was a senior. I remember walking through the halls one day with my friends and passing him without saying "hi." Almost 20 years later, I still wake up in the night regretting that. I have no doubt he's forgotten it.

Just before that school year, George, the uncle who lived in the cottage, died. George had a



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learning disability and couldn't read or write. But one time he ate dog food to try to convince us kids to eat our dinner, so he knew a trick or two. George was in his 50s when he went. He and my dad had gone through a few stretches where they didn't talk for one reason or another. At George's funeral though, Kenny and I approached the casket together, and my father came up behind us, grabbed our shoulders, and said,

"Remember, there's nothing like having a brother."

A year later, I went off to college. Kenny got contact lenses, the braces came off, and a barber cut his hair tight. By his senior year he was a popular kid, the star of the high school baseball team that made the state semifinals. In his high school yearbook, he won best smile. At his graduation ceremony, in front of a few thousand people at a giant equestrian

center in southern Maryland, he delivered a fine speech about fresh starts.

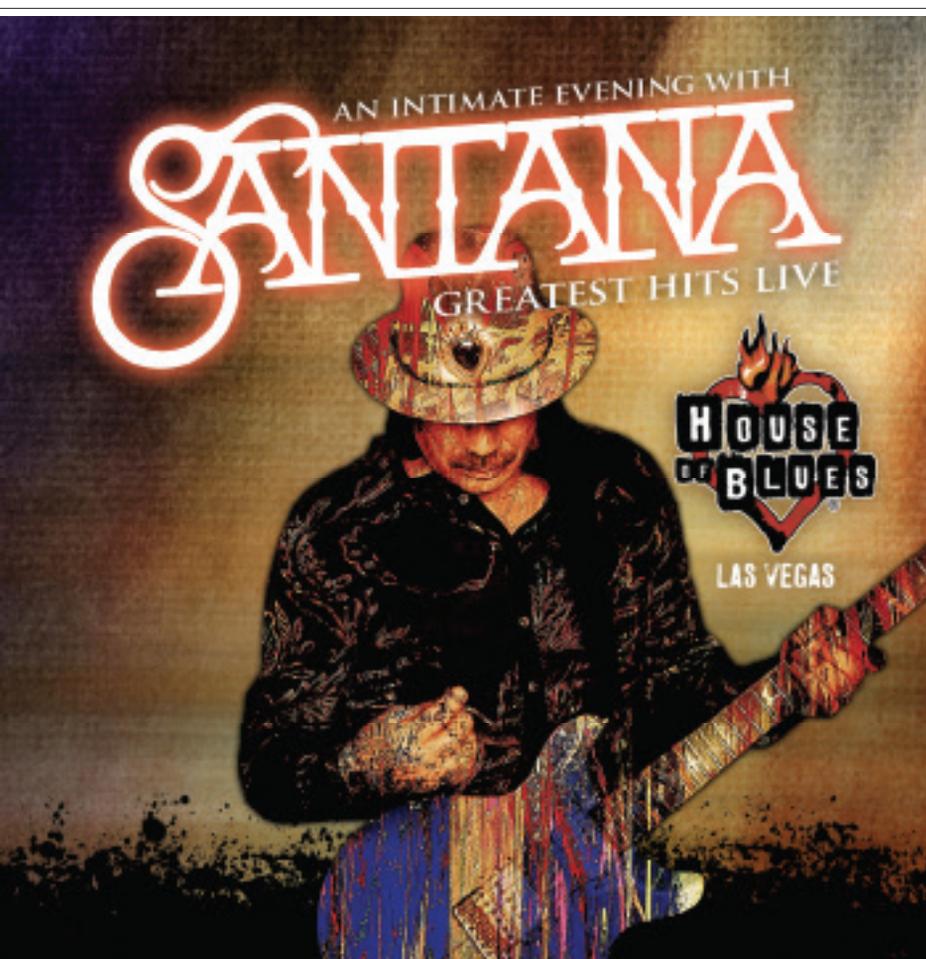
I remember we sat in the front row, my mother and father and I. My brother had so many academic medals around his neck he sounded like the ghost of Jacob Marley as he walked up to the lectern, jingling and jangling. Then he looked out over the crowd and delivered a very Kenny opening line. It's 17 words, equal parts history and pop culture and humor and metaphor, capped with his unmistakable, matter-of-fact style. "Yogi Berra once said, 'It ain't over 'til it's over,'" he started. "Well, it's over. We're done with childhood."

**F**RIDAY, APRIL 5, 2013, 8 a.m.: the best breakfast I ever ate. I'd pulled into Baltimore the night before, on the eve of the Orioles' home opener. Kenny had scored a pair of tickets from a friend who works field maintenance at Camden Yards.

I'd just accepted a new job. My divorce had gone final the previous fall. My father had a bad run of strokes the year before that, forever altering our roles as sons and father.

Kenny and I don't talk every day, or every week for that matter, but we are two of the lucky siblings who grow up and become friends as adults. We take vacations together every year and spend much of that time trying to find good food and water. We're still very different: He punched a hole in a wall in a fit of frustration over my dad's decline; I simply mowed my lawn in silence, over and over and over.

We woke up on Opening Day and went to the Sip & Bite, a 24-hour restaurant that's been open since 1948 on Boston Street, just across from the river that feeds the bay that fed us crabs and lessons as kids. Kenny stuffed his travel bottle of Old Bay seasoning in his pocket because you



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can never be too safe, and I made change for a buck and shoved some quarters into a newspaper box for the Opening Day edition of *The Baltimore Sun*.

The Sip & Bite was packed that morning with everyone from construction workers to police officers to people in suits. We sat at a table in the corner and looked at a menu that boldly claimed, “Best Crab Cakes in Baltimore.” The third item, highlighted in orange, was the “Eastern Shore,” a crab cake topped with bacon and an egg, served on a bun with a side of home fries.

We ordered two Eastern Shores and two Natty Bohs. As the waitress walked away, we looked around the restaurant at people eating omelets and biscuits and drinking orange juice.

“I guess everybody else thinks it’s too early for crab cakes,” I said.

“I don’t understand that,” my brother said. “It’s the best thing on the menu. Why wouldn’t you get the best thing on the menu?”

We clinked the necks of the Natty Bohs together and toasted to Opening Day. Our plates arrived. People sitting around us looked at them. These were crab cakes—real crab cakes, as the tides intended—huge lumps of meat, held together only by small squares of bread, eggs, mayonnaise, and the common sense that a crab cake is only worth the amount of crab meat in it. A guy sat down at the table next to us and told the waitress he’d have what we were having. It spread like that. A dozen or so nurses showed up after the overnight shift, and they all ordered beers, too. By the time we left, nearly everyone at the diner was drinking with us and toasting to Opening Day, all filled up on crab meat and hope.

*Michael Graff is the executive editor of Charlotte magazine. Tell him about your best breakfast ever at [michaelngraft@gmail.com](mailto:michaelngraft@gmail.com).*