

**WE WILL
TELL YOU
OTHER-
WISE**

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Paul

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DON'T TELL YOUR MOTHER

There are three things you need to be a smelt fisherman: a net, a bucket, and your thumb.

There is only one thing you need to be a cadaver, and that's to be dead. My father and I had gone smelt fishing each spring ever since I'd turned seven. Now it was 1972, I was a boy of ten, and Richard Nixon had just been reelected president. We didn't know then what would happen with my mother's newest lump. My father was a doctor, and I'd been pestering him to let me see a real dead person, but he wasn't sure that was a good idea. My mother had always said yes to the smelt fishing, but she stayed home when we went, so she didn't have a chance to say anything about the cadaver.

Every time, we'd make the drive into Chicago before dark and park on Lakeshore Drive, just south of Navy Pier. Other fishermen would already be on the shore, sitting on overturned pickle buckets, holding their nets, and drinking beer. I would carry our bucket, stuffed with the net, and my father would carry our lawn chairs, the ones we never actually used on our lawn.

But on this trip, when we got to the breakwater, my father couldn't decide where to put the chairs. I could see how much he wanted to sit in one of the fishermen's circles, even though he disguised this as a friendly wink at me. They didn't know us, and we didn't know them, my father told me, but these good folks were the ones who came to the lake to catch their dinner, these good folks

who didn't have money for things like lawn chairs or piano lessons or station wagons to take them to baseball practice.

I would have sat with them, no problem. They seemed fine to me, laughing a lot or just sitting back and looking out over Lake Michigan without clearing their throats to take up the silence.

That night we sat closer than we ever had before, just at the edge of one of their circles, around a fire burning yellow and red in an oil drum. We could hear a man in a brown coat telling a story about a one-eyed cat that honest-to-God predicted the future.

My father smiled at me, which meant, *You see, son? This is real life, here. This is what I'm talking about. Isn't this better than television?* And I smiled back at him because it *was* better than television.

We dropped our nets into the water, knowing the smelt would swim the same direction they always do and that before they could warn their family and friends a few rows back, everyone they knew and loved would crash into the net along with them. Then we raised the net, heavy with all those smelt, and picked them out one by one. Some were as small as my little finger, some as big as a small perch. Their size didn't matter. We popped their heads off—*Snap! Snap!*—squeezing them between our thumbs and index fingers. Then we scooped our thumbs into the holes where their heads were supposed to be and gutted them clean.

We always waited to eat until we were back home. My father would cook the smelt in a cast-iron skillet, and when they were perfectly browned, we would pop the whole smelt—tail, scales, and all—right into our mouths. But that night we didn't go home, and my father kept moving our chairs closer to the circle. Everyone kept on fishing and drinking and talking, except I was right there with them and everything felt different. The man in the brown coat invited us to cook our smelt over his fire. It was warm around the fire, and I liked the sizzle smell and the slow, steady way we ate them, smelt after smelt after smelt.

After a while a man who looked like a woman, with a small, soft face and thin wrists, stood up and handed my father a bottle of beer.

The man's hand was red raw, with dirt and blood packed under long fingernails. My father did not keep staring at that hand the way I did but looked up into the man's eyes and said, "Thanks much," then took a long swig of the beer.

We sat and fished and ate and my father told some stories I had never heard before. One time, when he was a boy, his grandfather aimed a pistol through the living room window and shot a porcupine off the cab of his truck. Another time, long ago, his cousin Mike went swinging from a rope into Cold Lake and never came up again.

The man in the brown coat said, "Cousin of mine: same damn thing, different lake."

Then the man in the brown coat told us about his mother, her brown-sugar ham and blue-flowered housedress and the prize-winning tomatoes in her garden.

"That was down in Carolina," he said. "Mind you, everything grows in Carolina."

I wanted to say something, too, so I asked, "Which Carolina, North or South?"

The man who looked like a woman put his arm around the man in the brown coat's shoulder, leaned in, and giggled. Then he said, "Why South, boy! It's gotta be South!"

It was getting late when we heard a man in another circle raise his voice: "Get the hell out here, Marty."

The man in the brown coat got up, saying, "I'd better go see about this."

The man who looked like a woman said, "Sit your ass down, Georgie-Pie."

So now the man in the brown coat was Georgie-Pie, and Georgie-Pie laughed and walked toward the arguing men anyway. Our circle went on eating and drinking, but we were quiet now. We were listening.

The loud man said, "I don't owe you shit, Marty, and you know it." Then the other man, Marty, said something that none of us could make out.

The loud man was getting louder: “You think you gotta claim, here? You think you gotta *claim*?” My father turned his chair, and I watched him keeping an eye on the men in the light of the fires.

The man who looked like a woman said softly, “Georgie-Pie,” but we all knew that Georgie-Pie couldn’t hear it. Georgie-Pie stepped between the two men and gripped their shoulders, turning to face one, then the other. He told them something in a low voice about no need, no need.

“You see this, George? Can you believe this shit?” said the loud man.

My father told me this was not good. He wanted to take me home. He said we would just leave our fishing gear right where it was, and when he said “Go” we would go quickly, heading away from the commotion, even though we’d have to cut back to get to the car.

I was ready for my father’s signal, but before he could say the word, we heard Georgie-Pie cry out, “Ohhh,” and saw him slump to the ground. Marty was the one to go, fast, running into the night. I heard the loud man shout, “George!” The man who looked like a woman moved toward him, saying, “Darling, Darling,” and crouched where Georgie-Pie was curling up.

My father told me to hand him my coat, then went straight to Georgie-Pie. I followed him, and stumbled over a pickle bucket. My father knelt down next to Georgie-Pie and told him, “Don’t worry, I’m a doctor.” Then he lifted Georgie-Pie’s head, placed my coat under his neck, pulled up Georgie-Pie’s blood-soaked T-shirt and searched the skin on his belly. I watched closely as my father put his hands into Georgie-Pie’s stomach right where the blade had gone in.

My father sent me for help, and I heard myself repeating every word that he told me to say, one word for every step I ran. And I ran like a ballplayer rounding third base and headed for home, like a silver smelt trying to reach the shore. I ran until I reached the lit curb, stepped into the phone booth, dialed the operator, and spilled every word into the mouth-piece: “There has been a stabbing at the breakwater near Navy Pier, and we need an ambulance immediately

for one conscious male victim, age forty-five, who is in the care of a surgeon from Mercy Hospital. The attacker fled but alert the police that his name is Marty, and he was last seen running near the pier.”

Back at the water’s edge, I saw my father with his hands still inside the hole in Georgie-Pie’s stomach. There was blood on my father’s arms, but the bleeding had stopped. My father said, “All right, my friend, you’re going to be just fine.”

“Just *fine*,” he said again, this time directly to the man who looked like a woman.

Then, to me, my father said, “Son, are you alright?” I could only nod my head, because suddenly I felt like I could cry, and I didn’t want that. I wanted to be ready for anything. The loud man and the man who looked like a woman both thanked my father. They thanked him and thanked him, and then they thanked God.

It took nine minutes for the ambulance to get there, and my father told the paramedics they sure took their sweet time. He would not take his hands out of Georgie-Pie, not until there was a stretcher under Georgie-Pie’s back and a needle in his arm and a white cotton blanket pulled up to his waist, not until a paramedic presented a sealed IV bag and a small metal clamp, which he held up for my father. “Satisfied?” he asked.

Then my father said, “OK. Take this fellow to Mercy. Not Cook County, Mercy. Under the care of Dr. Morrison. He’s on tonight.”

The paramedic agreed but said he couldn’t let any of these people ride in the ambulance. When my father said what the hell, the paramedic said policy is policy and to take it up with his boss.

After Georgie-Pie and the ambulance had gone, the loud man and the man who looked like a woman told us, “We know the way to Mercy. It’s late. You just get your boy home.”

In the car, I thought about my father and me almost leaving too soon. I thought about my mother, waiting for us at home. I thought about quick jabs with sharp knives, where we go if we never wake up, and Georgie-Pie.

“I want to go to Mercy, too,” I told my father.

“Son,” my father started to say.

“We have to make sure he’s all right,” I said. “We *have* to.” And my father turned the car around.

At Mercy, my father talked with Dr. Morrison, and we found the loud man and the man who looked like a woman in the waiting room, drinking cups of black coffee.

They stood up, and my father told them, “George is resting now. He looks very good.”

“Can we take him?” asked the man who looked like a woman.

“Not yet,” my father said. “He needs to be monitored to make sure there’s no sign of infection. He should go home tomorrow.”

The loud man said, “Well, we don’t know what to say.”

We all shook hands and wished each other well. When my father and I got to the elevator he told me there was something he wanted me to see.

“But please don’t tell your mother,” he said, “it might upset her.”

And I understood.

We went down to the basement, and that’s where my father showed me the cadaver. His name was John Doe. My father and I put on masks and gloves and stood next to John Doe. Then my father said, “I’m sorry, son,” but I didn’t know if he meant the long night, or John Doe, or the new lump in my mother’s breast. I wanted to tell my father how glad I was for the night, how good it felt to save somebody.

Then he asked me if I thought it was time to put John Doe away, and it was.