

The Last Day of the Season

It was still dark outside when my father woke me.

"Hey, let's catch some fish," he said.

I climbed down from my bunk and dressed quietly so I wouldn't wake my sister, who was sleeping in the bottom bed. It was September and I'd started the sixth grade a few weeks earlier.

"We're heading up north," my father said as I ate toaster waffles at the kitchen table. He was kneeling in front of the refrigerator packing our Coleman cooler with sandwiches, apples, and cans of beer and soda. "A place my old man took me when I was your age. We'll catch some serious fish, bud, I guarantee it.

The morning was cool and the sky above the horizon was deep orange. As we drove, the landscape changed from suburban boulevards to steep green mountain valleys.

We traveled in silence for hours until my father finally said, "Here we are."

The place wasn't a town, just a few small houses along a wide, slow-moving stretch of river. One of the houses looked like it had been burned out in a fire, its wooden eaves charred black. Someone had spray-painted "Fuck YOMAN!" in red paint on the side of the house.

"I guess somebody don't like Yoman," my father joked.

We drove on looking for a place to rent a boat but only found more forest. My father turned the truck around and we went back to the settlement. We parked in front of the house furthest from the Yoman house and my father knocked on the front door. A tiny old woman in a quilted pink robe appeared behind the door glass.

"Morning, ma'am" my father said.

The woman gave us a puzzled look.

"Sorry to bother you. Do you happen to have a boat?"

She unlatched the door. It squeaked as she pushed it open.

"Have a what?"

My father pointed across the road at the river. "My boy and me want to fish but we don't have no boat."

She stared at him for a moment, then looked me up and down. Finally she said, "My brother has a little boat. He's three houses up, the blue one."

The brother introduced himself as Ernie. My father offered him five dollars, and he agreed to the deal with no fanfare, as though he rented his boat to strangers every day. He was old and stooped but insisted on helping us carry the boat down the highway to the launch.

"You think this thing will hold all them fish?" my father asked me and winked.

Ernie spent a few minutes explaining the boat's quirks to my father and then shoved us out into the current.

We found a small cove shaded by a stand of willow trees and set anchor. At the far end of the cove an enormous boulder protruded from the water. My father pointed to it and we watched as a muskrat slid down the face of the rock and into the water.

I'd forgotten how to tie a hook, so my father did it for me. We cast our lines toward the fast water at the edge of the cove.

"How are things?" my father asked.

"Good," I said.

"Your sister tells me you tore down your whole bike and put it back together again."

I nodded.

"That takes some brains, bud."

I shrugged and said, "Not really."

"Sure it does. You want to be an engineer someday?"

"Like, driving a train?"

He chuckled. "That's one kind of engineer. I'm talking about the kind of engineer that figures out how to build things. Machines and stuff."

"Maybe," I said.

"You know Hunkie, the guy who works on the truck? His kid Joe is an engineer. Makes good money."

I asked him if fixing bicycles was a good job.

"Maybe for some people, but you're too smart for that. You should go to college." He winked at me. "Learn how to make 'em, not fix 'em." He tucked a pinch of dip snuff into his lip and flicked the excess grains of tobacco off his fingers. He offered the can to me and I took a small pinch from it and tucked it into my lip. It tasted bitter and burned the inside of my mouth.

"Listen," he said, looking past me into the trees across the river, "Mom and me, we really, you know, care about you and Kate. We'll always be around for you. What I mean is, we love you guys."

"I know," I said. It was the first time my father had ever said those words to me. I wanted to say them back, but I got nervous and the moment passed.

We fished the rest of the afternoon but caught nothing. My father blamed our bad luck on the heavy clouds and the mud in the river. When the sun began to set we motored to the shore, lashed the boat to a metal stake that Ernie had planted, and started for home.



As the daylight faded it began to rain on the winding two-lane highway. We drove on through dense patches of forest interrupted by small tin-sided houses, each with a single streetlight shining in the driveway.

Eventually we came to a town called Ford's Eddy. We cruised slowly down the main street. It was lined by yellow-brick buildings, many of which were boarded shut with sheets of warped plywood that had turned silver with age and exposure.

"You hungry?" my father asked.

I nodded and he parked the truck in front of a large stone house. There was a lighted 7-Up sign in one of the front windows that also read "Hotel Flick." The hotel's mansard roof loomed high above the street, and dark streaks from the rain seemed to ooze from its mortar seams.

My father held my hand as we climbed the front steps and entered through the front door. Inside, the place looked nothing like I'd imagined it would. It was harshly lit by fluorescent tubes hanging from a low ceiling, and the walls were covered in cheap wooden paneling. Along the left side of the room there was a long bar with a brass rail, and a row of tall booths with red plastic bench seats lined the right side. An etched mirror, unpolished and faded from neglect, ran the entire length of the wall behind the bar.

The locals sitting at the bar paid no attention to us. We sat in one of the red booths and my father ordered me fried chicken, onion rings, and coleslaw. He drank mugs of beer and shots of whiskey while I ate and drank grape soda through a straw.

After I was done eating, he laid two quarters on the table. He belched loudly and nodded toward a jukebox at the far end of the room and said, "Why don't you play some tunes on that thing."

I ran to the jukebox and studied the pink and white labels under the glass. There were Journey singles but I had all their cassettes at home and didn't want to waste my money. I finally decided on Foreigner's "Hot Blooded" and a "Heartbreaker" by Pat Benetar.

When I returned to the booth my father wasn't there. He'd taken a stool at the end of the bar. A small television played quietly above where he was sitting. The TV showed images of long lines at gas stations and colored graphs plotting the rise in oil prices due to the Iranian Revolution. My father was watching it and talking with a wrinkle-faced man dressed in a John Deere cap and green overalls. I walked over there.

"There's so much fucking oil under this country it'd make you cry," my father was telling the man. "For Christ's sake, the first oil well in the world was in Pennsylvania."

The other man sipped his beer and nodded. My father asked the man his name and he replied, "Pike." My father told the bartender to bring him a can of Skoal and a fresh beer for Pike.

"Goddamn Ayatollah," my father said. "We shouldn't have nothing to do with that mess over

there. There's plenty of oil left in this country, it's just too expensive to drill. Over there in Saudi Arabia they pretty much scoop it out of the fucking ground. They're hitting it at a hundred feet."

Pike nodded.

"You know in the Beverly Hillbillies," my father said, "when Old Jed shoots the ground and up comes a bubblin' crude? That's the story in Saudi Arabia, Iran, all them places. Costs them fucking pennies and they sell it to us for thirty dollars a barrel, the bastards."

Pike stamped his cigarette in the ashtray and lifted a fresh one to his lips. "I don't know all the particulars," he said, "I just know gas is too dear."

My father noticed me standing next to him and pulled me to his side. "This is my boy, Todd," he said, mussing my hair. "Say hello to Pike, bud."

Pike extended his hand and I shook it. "Good to know you," he said.

"This kid can tear down a whole BMX bike and put it back together again. Eleven years old!"

"How about that," Pike said.

"I told his mother to get him in a gifted classes. He's too fucking smart for regular school."

Pike said, "He looks it."

My father called to the bartender and asked him to make change for two dollars, all in quarters. He dumped the coins in my cupped hands and told me to play the jukebox as much as I wanted.

There was a Pac-Man machine beside the jukebox and I loaded my quarters into that instead. I must have been playing for about twenty minutes when my father called to me across the room. "Todd, let's go," he said. "On the double."

I felt every eye in the place following us. My father was already through the door as I passed behind Pike, who was shaking his head at the bartender. He pointed his thumb in our direction and said something to another man further down the bar.

As we climbed into the truck my father said, "What a dump. Assholes."

We drove into the pouring rain and darkness. The cab of the truck was filled with the sour odor

of alcohol and cigarettes. My father was driving barely fifty miles an hour and the truck drifted gently from side to side in our lane of the wet highway. The motion made me sleepy and I dozed off.



I woke up as we pulled into the driveway. My father killed the truck engine and removed his keys from the ignition. He laid them on top of the dashboard, then draped his hands over the steering column and leaned heavily against the wheel. The engine block made soft pinging sounds under the hood as it cooled.

"This is a good little house, ain't it?" my father said. His speech was still a bit slurred. The house was dark, but the skies had cleared to reveal a brilliant white moon high above the ridge of the roof. "I always wanted to build an extra room, right there," he said, pointing to the left side of the house. "A family room. A place to watch Steeler games and that. What do you think?"

"That would be great," I said.

"Yeah, well." He leaned back in the seat and pushed the bill of his cap away from his forehead. "I'm sorry we didn't catch no fish, bud. Son of a bitch, last day of the season, whole river to ourselves, I figured they'd be starving. I should have planned it better."

"It's okay," I said. "I had fun."

"Me too, bud," my father said, patting my shoulder. "Well, you'd better get on up to bed." He found the truck key on his ring and inserted it into the ignition.

The roar of the truck engine startled me. At that moment I understood that my father wasn't coming inside with me, and the real purpose of our day together. I guessed that my mother had taken my sister somewhere special to have the same conversation.

"Where will you live?" I asked.

"I have a place," he said. "Nothing great, but I didn't have much notice. I'll be back and forth to move some stuff. Maybe you could give me a hand with that, big guy."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I asked.

He paused before answering. "Let's not get into all that yet, okay?"

I opened the truck door and slid down off the vinyl seat to the driveway and closed the door.

"We gotta do this again," my father said, "in the Spring. We can't let them fish get away with skunking us, right?"

"Right," I said.

"Okay, then. You'd better go on up."

I collected my rod and tackle box from the back of the truck and waved to my father. He nodded to me and then backed the truck into the street and drove off into the night.



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