

FISHING IN MIDDLE AMERICA

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In your dream, something is touching, dragging across your face. You lie on your back on a riverbank, mouth gaping to the clouds, in your sleeping bag in the weeds. A heavy dew covers you. You are damp all over and your back feels like it has been pummeled with a steel pipe. You are cold. Something is touching your face again! What is it?

The smell of wood smoke floats to you, along with the sharp stink of your own wet clothes. You open your eyes and try to regain some sense of the world. Something hangs now in your field of vision. It's so close to your eyes it's blurry, but what is it?

Why, it's a little face—a little bluegill's face! It's the severed head of a fish! Part of its guts hang out in loose strands from the cut behind the gills. The guts plop on your face, cold and hard and slimy, and then the fish head rises inches above you, dancing. It bobs on a string.

The first sound in your ears on this new day is laughter. Now things come together. You know your older brother's laugh, the small laugh of someone who does not talk much. Your eyes follow the fish head up its string to the tip of a fishing pole. Then back to the person standing there who owns the laugh. He lowers the rod tip again and the bloody fishface plops on your cheek.

"Mr. Fishhead says it's time to get up, sucker," he says.

There are two laughs now.

You sit up—what else can you do?—and look around with a mind cloudy from forty-five minutes of sleep. You focus on the source of the other laugh. Ah yes—it comes from your younger brother. Of course. And he has something he would like to say this morning.

“Hey, just think,” he says. “Just think if he’d pushed the cutbait away with his hand. It would’ve hooked him. Jerkface would’ve woken up with a hook through his hand!”

Both laughs echo through your sinus pressure. Even without getting hooked, this is a rough way to wake up. But you are a little sad, too—morning light means it is almost over.

So you pull on your boots and take a leak in the weeds up the beach. Your body pulses with the low-grade electrical current of too-little sleep. You look around. Good campsite. Here, where the river curves around, a beach rises from the inside bend. The beach consists of sand and gravel that has been pushed along this current for thousands of years. The fire smolders. Its smoke mixes with the mist rising off the river. No tent has been pitched, because last night you fished with only your brothers, and without the wives along who needs the accoutrements of a tent? You see the sleeping bags, still spread out on the ground around the chunks of still-smoking burnt wood. They’re wet and dirty, like the bedding of a homeless person in a big city somewhere. You don’t care, because you have a home. Your home is this sand that has been pushed along the river for centuries.

You zip up and walk down the beach to where the boat rests. You feel a flash of love for the boat—aluminum and green and beat all to heck with the name carefully spray-painted on the bow—ORCA II. The boat in Jaws that the big shark sank.

You lift a rod from the boat, and this too is a thing of beauty, a four hundred dollar fish pole, the reel oiled and machined and made in Sweden. You’ve spent more money on catfishing gear than on furniture and this makes you a misguided dingdong. No, you’re kidding. Of course it was a wise investment. Don’t even joke about that, you admonish yourself.

You reach into the livewell, which is now a deadwell, because it’s filled with dead baitfish. You lift a bluegill as big as your palm from the deadwell and cut its head off with bone scissors.

Blood smears the serrated jaws and you rinse them in the river. Channel cats like cut fish. This is the way God made them. So you stab the head through its eyes onto a large hook. You've done this for many years, and you'll do it until you die, but you may never get comfortable with all of this death. But you'll always use live bait at night, because flathead catfish like that, and cut fish for the channel cats. This may or may not be the way God made you, but you have absolved yourself for any sins you commit on this riverbank this morning.

You cast out where the current sweeps along the far bank and place the rod in the holder before snugging the line against the sinker. Your brothers are fishing on either side of you. You realize you haven't spoken to them.

"You zeros catch anything yet?" you ask. "Or were you too busy dropping cutbait on my face?"

They laugh like little kids, although they are both fathers. The older one has two little girls and the younger one has a son on the way. Or, as he put it when he called with the news, his wife "Has a turkey in the oven."

"I had a bite," the older one says.

"He means he hooked a piece of the current," the younger one says. "We ain't catching crap."

You all sit in folding chairs and watch the current. Now you can relearn the world in the truth of daylight. The logjams you fished around suddenly seem less massive. The river seems narrower. The whole world seems smaller in the light of day.

"You know," the younger brother says, "I hope ol Bop's eyes are all right."

You all nod. Bop is your cousin. He is the fourth brother. His real name is Ben but he has been named Bop for reasons no one can remember. This is a trip he would've been on, but last week his retinas detached and he faces extensive surgeries. The doctors will slice open his eyeballs

and drain them before trying to reattach his retinas. They're pretty sure they can save his sight, but his eyes will betray him for the rest of his life. Perhaps he will see this river only ten more times? Twenty? Perhaps he's seen it for the last time.

This news of this problem—it's not something you could foresee—alarms all of you. Detached retinas! What's next, your first heart attack? You're all still kids! It makes you want to take more of these river trips, as hard as they are on your aging bodies and growing families. Your back still aches from the ground even now.

Of course, you deal with Bop's situation with the tenderness it deserves. Daily, you call and email support and encouragement. You write in an email, "Hey loser. Hope the surgery goes well. Since one eye is worse than the other, we'll start calling you Cybop." You do not write that you'll give him one of your eyes, if it comes to that. You don't need to.

"Yes," you say as your line jumps against the current, "I hope ol Cybop can join us next time."

"He's annoying as crap, but I kinda miss the hoser," the younger brother says.

"Dummy," the older brother says, like he is saying amen to a wise and meaningful prayer.

You fish until the sun rises over the trees. The fishing, which has been slow all night, slows even more. You're all thinking the same thing: time to head back to the wives, kids, dogs, jobs.

"What time we going today?" the older one asks. "I want to go squirrel hunting this afternoon."

"You better get some sleep first, or you'll shoot your own hand," you remind him.

"I would shoot your dogs, if they were at Mom and Pop's," he says.

Both of your brothers live close to your parents, near the farm you all grew up on. When you drive down there, you take the dogs and run through the woods of your youth.

“If you shot my dogs,” you tell him, “I would take your little rifle and shove it up your butt and blow a hole in your colon.”

With that you all stand and pack the gear into the boat. The rods stay out to give the fish one last chance to bite. They are the last things loaded into the *Orca II*. *Great name!* you think again.

At the ramp, you fasten the boat to the trailer and check a hundred things to ensure there’ll be no accidents on the highway. It’s bad enough that you’ve gotten less than an hour of sleep. The brothers have not slept at all, and they have to drive almost two hours home.

“You all need to stop and buy some pills off a trucker,” you tell them. “Man, this kind of fishing is harder than work,” a brother says.

You all laugh. The older brother chokes on the Rooster long-cut tobacco he is shoveling into his bottom lip for the ride.

“Well, you donkeys stay awake. I’ll be in touch,” you tell them. It’s understood you’ll talk to them on the phone about four times this week. Every time you’ll talk almost exclusively about fishing.

“Well, it was a good time,” the younger brother says as he climbs into the truck with the older brother. “They just weren’t bitin.”

“Yeah, the fish more or less got together and told us to stick it,” you say. “It happens that way sometimes.

“See you all later,” you add as you start your truck. “See ya later,” both brothers say.

“Let me know when your wife drops that calf,” you yell out.

The younger brother stands on the truck floorboard and looks over the cab. “She ain’t due for three weeks,” he says.

You have driven almost halfway home before you look in the rearview mirror. Your hair's so greasy it stands under its own power. Your eyes are blood- shot. Your skin looks so thin you can almost see the arteries and veins moving their cargo through your face. Dried blood from the fish head smears both cheeks.

You cannot go into Burger King like this! You'll have to hit the drive-through.

You're exhausted, but you need to go home and clean up the boat and equipment. Everything must be washed and dried in the sun. There are papers to grade, the yard should be mowed. Cybop needs to be called. He'll want to know how the trip went, what he missed out on. You'll not be able to put all of it into words. How do you tell someone you laughed a lot? The highway looks like a grainy videotape of a road-trip from the past spread out in front of you. You swoop around cars and barely realize you've passed them. These cars grow smaller in the mirrors and then disappear. You'll never see those cars again. You drive for miles and can recall no details from those miles. You are exhausted. Still, you can't help but start calculating. When, exactly, will you be able to fish the river with your brothers again?