

Another Fish Story

By Mitchell Waldman

A thunderstorm woke me last night. The storm was right on top of us. It sounded like the house was inside this huge kettle drum and each time, moments before the boom, the whole sky lit up like ten million flash bulbs all set off at once.

I was terrified. I don't know why. It was just a storm. I'm older now, an old man, too old to be afraid of storms. But this storm brought to mind another storm, one I'd forgotten about until then.

We had taken a trip over a Fourth of July weekend. It was to be a fishing trip for the men and boys and a rest for my mother and the two other women, who stayed home, from cooking, cleaning and other motherly chores. We stayed in a cabin by a lake in the wilds of Wisconsin. They weren't really wilds. The lakeshore was dotted with small groups of cabins that called themselves fishing resorts. Ours called itself U-NEED-A-REST.

This resort consisted of six or seven broken down cabins and a boat dock. The first thing we saw after driving past the tiny sign announcing U-NEED-A-REST was a cat throwing up in the grass. As if that weren't enough, the cat was black and had, I was sure, crossed our path. Being twelve years old I was old enough to recognize the significance of this event.

Our cabin was tiny, smelled of mildew and creaked with any type of breeze. Swarms of mosquitoes feasted on our warm suburban blood.

But the fishing was great.

The fish I and my stepbrother Rick caught were mostly young Northern Pike, below the legal limit. Be we kept them. What were a couple of inches, anyway?

I liked fishing then. There was an instant thrill the moment the fish hit your line. A sudden pinch in your stomach and you'd get tense all over and your eyes would swell. This is

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what you'd been waiting for, sometimes for hours, this jerking, electric tension on your line. There was an element of danger, of risk involved. Thinking back I'm not sure what the danger was. A green, finned creature weighing not more than just a few pounds, being dragged around by a strong monofilament line with a hook stuck in its lip could hardly offer much of a threat or, for that matter, resistance.

But Rick and I had seen the pictures. It was their scales, their razor sharp teeth. I wouldn't even touch one if it landed in the boat. He called me "Sissy," though he wouldn't touch them either. They were so slippery I figured I might just catch a tooth or fin when I reached for the hook.

So I would pull throw him into the boat where he'd flap on the aluminum boat floor like a tossed pancake on a hot griddle. If he were there I'd wait for my stepfather to unhook him. Or, if only Rick and I were in the boat -- every morning before the adults woke up -- we'd take a towel and wrap it around our catch so we wouldn't have to touch the skin. If we'd forgotten the towel our fishing would be over and we'd head for the dock.

More than once the fish would twitch convulsively while I had hold of him. Then I'd get nervous and yank the hook out, pulling out of his lip, tongue or guts out with it (all the while, Rick standing there arms crossed, like the boss he would become in later life, telling me what to do). And the fish would keep staring at me. His eyes would get duller. He'd lay quietly on the boat floor, waiting to be strung, to be hung on a line. Once in a while he'd panic and jump in the air madly. Then he'd rest quietly on the floor again. It was as if he was conserving every ounce of energy for the next leap. We'd thread him through gill and mouth, tie one end of the stringer to the boat and toss him over the side, where he'd hang, dragging along with the boat. Then we'd straighten our lines and hurry to cast again. We knew that where there was one there were more to be had.

We caught underage fish. Scaled them, chopped off their heads, fins and tails, ripped out their guts. Then, watching the men swilling their Budweisers (except for my stepdad, a nondrinker, standing there in his emaciated frame, shorts pulled up past his navel) frying the

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fish in oil in an aluminum pan over the open fire. Rick by his side, under his arm with the other boys. Stepdad smiling at Rick, tousling his hair, and the other boys—Sam and Bobby, by their dads, while I sat back under a tree, sipping my cream soda, reading one of my sci fi books. And then, joining them, eating the fresh fried fish off paper plates.

I gave up fishing some time ago. Thinking of Rick and my stepdad, I gave up a lot of things long ago.

Then there was that cat. He was not to be taken lightly. While Rick and I were getting up before dawn and rowing out on the misty lake, something was brewing in the eyes of fate.

It came in the guise of a storm that developed the night of the Fourth. Just before the sun went out. In a matter of minutes the sky went from bright blue to a peculiar day-glo shade of yellow-orange. The winds gusted suddenly. The trees around us were snapping like rubber bands. The sky turned black to the west and to the north, but was bright orange in between. The darkness spread quickly and closed in on us. We stood in the doorway of our cabin, watching, then, when the winds whipped up, retreated). The radio said tornadoes surrounded the whole lakeside area.

We were in a tiny cabin. It wasn't much. You couldn't even get the door to shut all the way. My stepdad put a chair in front of it to keep it closed. We felt naked. No big house to protect us, no big buildings or communities nearby, no false securities to grab onto. I nearly hid under the table. I imagined our deaths, which would seem somehow heroic happening on the Fourth. I imagined the headlines back home describing the tragedy. I remembered the cat.

As the sun set the sky became even blacker. My stepdad kept the radio on for information. The winds howled around us. The old cabin creaked. The radio crackled with each flash of light in the sky. And there was no rain. There should have been, but there wasn't.

My stepdad ordered Rick and me to bed. Everything would be fine, he said. I crawled onto an old damp mattress next to Rick and pulled the covers over my head.

"Whatssamatter, David, are you a scaredy cat? Awww, poor Davey."

"Shut up, Rick," I said. I didn't slug him then, but it was only a matter of time. But that's

another story.

The sounds of the storm and the radio alone filled the night. I shut my eyes as tight as I could under the blanket but the light still flashed through my eyelids. I clung to the blanket.

Finally the rains came. The friendly rains. Patting softly on the roof, at first. Then the winds died. The rain came down harder, thrashing the cabin and soothing my young mind. It was as if I was being bathed in the cool flood of water that protected me, that protected all of us from the black skies overhead.

Last night I pulled the shade up to keep an eye on the storm. It was early morning, actually. About 6:30. The sky was greenish-orange. It reminded me of that other storm. I don't know why, but I imagined the lightning would come right through my window, that it would reach out and choose me. There was no escape. Once again I was that little boy grasping the covers tightly in a world of storms, and fish guts, and of stepfathers and stepbrothers and mothers who didn't seem to notice. The thunder and lightning eventually gave way to the tapping, then pouring rain and only then could I sleep again.

When I closed my eyes I fell into a new world. I was swimming under water, breathing under water. Free. In this world, there was a different kind of storm that I saw only on occasion, when I came to the surface. It was high and bright and blue with white patches. It spelled danger. I stayed away from the blue and white storm and tried not to think about it, spending my day playing, propelling myself, flying through the water, darting through it, doing turns and flips, like an acrobat, with ease. Then there was a voice behind me. "What are you, a fraidy cat?" It propelled me upward, but not just because of the words, but also due to my own natural curiosity and hunger. There was an emptiness in my belly (and in my chest) that led me there, to be sure, but there was also an electric tension inside of me, the feeling of lurking danger, the excitement of the unknown, that pulled me upwards, as well. And then, then I saw the juicy squirming, worm waiting, just waiting for me.

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The End

Mitchell Waldman bio: Mitchell Waldman's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous publications. He is also the author of the novel, *A Face in the Moon*, and the story collection, *Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart* (Wind Publications), as well Fiction Editor for *Blue Lake Review*. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).