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Blood Fishing

by Brie Tiderington

Dad taught me how to catch fish best. He showed me that what was commonly called fishing was actually a variety of many activities. On hot spring days he would call me out of bed and we would walk down, already sweaty, to the dock. We only fished up north because the rivers were so dirty and crowded with boats.

Friday nights we'd drive up to the lake. The cars crawled along the highway under the descending sun. Nobody was in much of a hurry, they were entering a new world. We saw billboards for "World Famous chicken" and passed out-of-the-way gas stations. We drove through four block cities and stopped at "The Big Bear" for a pop. Afterwards we would head up sloping hills with old barns and drive around smooth curves until we reached the cabin. You always anticipated seeing the water first. But by the time we would arrive the waves were ripples and the boats purred softly to their destination. The cabin would fall asleep hearing the water lap onto shore, docking boats.

I much preferred fishing to eating the fish that was caught. The bones crunched between my teeth and the skin would slip off. Dad like serving the fish with their heads still on. Once he began a science lesson on a fish's brain until my mother became angry.

As we rode across the lake I ran the tips of my fingers through the water. We went through a field of water lilies and I picked a few, trying to keep their long stems as I pulled. The pine trees towered

over the lake and I rubbed more sunscreen into my face. Dad and I have the same skin, red and wrinkled around the eyes. We burn easily.

We dropped anchor in a shallow area and I dived in. We were on a sand bank that quickly fell off into deep black waters. The water was perfect and cool.

"Come on, let's go," Dad said. He helped me into the boat and we pushed off. I watched him steer us through the swampy wetlands. Green plants shot up on all sides of us and Dad pointed out two turtles. He was an intelligent man but still I think I sometimes disappointed him.

"Where's Maria this week-end?" he said.

"I don't know. Why does it matter?" I asked.

"I was just wondering," he said. But I knew why he asked. It was because Maria was better than me in so many ways. She made people laugh and stare at her face. She had fine indented features, the eyebrows, the cheekbones, the curled lips. Dad wondered why I wasn't with her, meeting new people and smiling--meeting boys. He would be unhappy to know that my best friend and I were growing apart.

I had so often admired her. She always knew how to please every person. But she was also a jealous person. She talked behind every person's back. She told jokes with one girl and later--privately--told jokes about that same girl. But I trusted her.

For a while I hadn't seen her. She was busy, I was busy. Her list of friends grew and I became more awkward around her. I was usually on hold when I talked to her. And Dad started asking where Maria was. The whole situation was a constant source of friction. I had only hoped she wouldn't come up over fishing.

At noon we reached our spot. We waved to pontoon boats with folks sipping drinks and drove around slow moving paddle boats, tan legs pounding away, water whooshing out behind them. We reached the far end of the chain of lakes and shut off the motor.

The worms were embedded in cool dirt. Dad baited my pole

and I pulled out a can of Coke.

"Here," he said, handing me the ready pole, the end of my line dancing with bait.

I took it and cast out. Then I sat back and waited. I watched the other fishing boats. Most men sat silent, eyeing the lines and scanning for fish. In one boat a man began wrestling with his tugged line. He pulled the pole back and back. He reeled in hard strokes, quick and with a strong look on his face. Finally he pulled out a long fish. A few men clapped and some raised their beer cans to him. Dad smiled.

"That's a big one he's got there."

"Yeah," I said, eyeing the wiggling fish. Soon it hung still, suffocated.

The day passed and one by one the other boats left. A few new ones came but didn't stay long. It was becoming frustrating.

"What's Sara doing this week-end?"

"Uuhhh, what does it matter? She's doing something and I'm here... fishing."

"Not too many fish though," Dad said and began reeling in.

"No." I began reeling in too. He laid down his pole and held his hand out for mine.

"I'll bait it," I said. Dad laughed and handed me the container of worms. I felt the dirt with one finger. It was black and stuck heavily onto my skin. I went in farther and pulled out a long worm.

I thought about how I learned in third grade that if you cut a worm in half, it would live. It would become two worms. The day we found that out kids at lunch ran around looking for worms. They placed them in small piles of three or four. And like dutiful scientists some boys and a few girls used plastic forks and knives to slice in half the worms. When the bell rang we left the worms there, guts and all on the black cement.

"Now put it right on the hook, don't let it slip," Dad said as a cloud passed over the sun.

I folded the worm and held it tightly as I fumbled with the

hook. I stuck one end of the worm into the sharpness of the hook. It went in easily enough but I couldn't put the whole worm through. I pushed harder and harder. I wanted to cast my line out and catch a fish twice the size of the one I had seen that day. I gave a final squeeze and the hook shot through. It shot straight through the worm and through my hand. For a moment I just sat there. And then slowly I pulled the hook out. It stung just a little. But as the hook came free of my skin, my cut swelled with blood.

"Hold your hand over the boat," said my Dad. "Stick it in the water, that might make it feel better."

I did. I pulled my hand back out of the water and pressed it, allowing the blood to drip into the water.

I noticed how easily the water mixed with my blood. The red slid off my hand and then branched out into patterns of all different shapes. I saw birds, faces and leaves created in the wake of my blood. Circles bellowed out like great rain clouds. I looked up to the pine trees. So long they had been there. What did this matter? We would fish again in a month.

And then I cried. Not only for that day, catching no fish, but for all days. I cried for days when nothing had been right. I cried for people who were gone and for those who were going. I cried for Maria and for my father. They would never meet again. How I would miss them. Their lives and mine were only at a crossroad.

I stared at my blood, my reflection. Something distorted it. A wave, a ripple.

"Dad, Dad, it's a fish, no, it's two fish, and more!" I was so happy. Fish! We had accomplished the day. My blood had attracted the trout and I had not cried in vain.