Nostalgia

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“Anything bitin’ over there, ya old fogey?” Harold leaned back on the tiny boat seat, gently jiggling the bobber floating thirty or so feet in front of him.

“Wouldn’t tell you if it was.” Frank let out a gruff laugh from behind Harold and grabbed a beer from the cooler, holding his fishing pole between his knees while he opened it.

“God, Frank, it’s only 10:30, what would Eleanor say?” He grabbed a beer for himself, holding the pole in his left hand and maneuvering the beer in his right. The two men sat, back to back, in the tiny fishing boat; Frank facing east, looking over the motor, sunlight lurking through the shrinking copse of pine trees on the shore, Harold facing west, watching the open lake and his misshapen shadow over the front of the boat.

“Eleanor wouldn’t give a good Goddamn, just so long as I’m out here and she’s at home.” He laughed again, they both knew how Frank’s wife felt about his fishing, and his drinking, and his general will to exist long past the point when she seemed to think he should have packed it in and given up.

“She’s tryin’ to get my driver’s license taken away, the old bat. Like that hydrant in Leedsville was my fault…” Frank shook his head and changed the subject. “So how’re your kids? Beverly still livin’ with that hippie fella from California?”

“Yeah. She’s still livin’ with him. I can never remember his name, Thad, Trout, Tyrone…” He shook his head, furrowed his wrinkled brow and took another sip of his beer, watching the lake. A turtle poked its head out of the murky water and disappeared again. “Anyway, they’re thinkin’ about movin’ to Canada or somethin’. There ain’t even a draft to dodge and he’s runnin’ off north and takin’ my daughter with him. And I was with you when you hit that hydrant. Damned thing jumped right out in front of you.” Harold winked over his shoulder, Frank ignored him.

“Boy needs a haircut too, I’d bet. Damn kids. Can’t get rid of ‘em when you want to, and when you need ‘em to clean the gutters, off they go to spend more of your money. Lucky for me, I don’t have any money for mine to steal.” He smiled as he jerked his bobber a couple of times, watched the water ripple out around it.

“Yeah. Daniel’s oldest is knocked up, she’s 17 and I’m gonna be a great-grandaddy. But I bet your wife already told you that.” Harold shook his head again, put his beer in the bottom of the boat and started reeling in his line.

“Figures,” snorted Frank. “Our daddies would’a killed us for a stunt like that.”

“Frank, did you think that no one noticed that your oldest was born 8 months after you and Eleanor got hitched? They just have no shame about it, that’s all. No fear of God in kids these days. Got any crawlers over there?”

“If you want crawlers, you’d better get your lazy ass out of bed and dig ‘em up, you’re as bad as my damn kids.” Frank moved the coffee can of dirt to his side of the boat, placing it safely between his feet.

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by it and you know it. We was lucky that Betty’s old man didn’t give us a shotgun weddin’, you know what I mean. I thought I was sunk for
“Sure.” Harold barked a short laugh and dug around in his tackle box for the chew can full of sawdust and wax worms, picked one out and threaded it onto his hook.

“Yeah, sure.” Frank muttered. “We were young. But things was different. It ain’t like the old days anymore and you know it. These kids do whatever suits ‘em, hell to what we taught ‘em.”

Harold carefully braced his feet on the bottom of the boat and cast his line out over the water. Hook, line and sinker hit with a small “Bloop” and the bobber bounced around for a moment before going still. The two men sat, facing their own waterfronts, in the tiny wooden boat, the only sounds the gentle lapping of the water against the sides, the quiet drone of dragonflies wandering by, the splashing of frogs moving on and around the lilypads on the surface of the lake.

“Any bites yet, Frank?”

“They call it fishin’ and not catchin’ for a reason, Harold.” Frank smiled to himself as Harold laughed behind him.

“I used to tell my kids the same thing. Shame they don’t listen anymore. Bet they think that about their own kids these days.”

“Mmmm.” Frank grunted and tugged gently at his fishing pole again. “Aha!” The pole jerked toward the lake, bobber disappearing beneath the surface of the water as Frank pulled gently and started reeling it in. The sun had risen over the gently waving trees on the side of the lake, but was still not free from the ominous-looking clouds.

“Got somethin’?” Harold leaned over his shoulder to investigate the sudden rocking of the boat.

“Not til it’s in the boat I don’t.” Frank fought against the fish, pulling the pole toward his left shoulder, Harold leaning over his right.

“You got ‘im. Reel it in slow.”

“I know good and well what I’m doin’. Mind your business.” The line went slack. Frank continued to reel and an empty hook appeared over the edge of the boat. “Damn it.”

“You went too fast,” Harold muttered, turning back to his side of the boat and his own unmoving bobber.

“Plannin’ on swimmin’ home?”

Harold didn’t respond.

“I didn’t think so.”

They each stared out at their respective halves of the lake, slowly sipping warm beer and trying to jiggle their bait into looking tastier. The sky darkened as a cloud crossed the sun, Harold looked up, pushing the brim of his floppy hat out of the way.

“Might rain.”

“Wanna head in?” Frank’s eyes never left his bobber.

“Nah. Fish like water. It’s fine by me.”

“Sandwiches in the cooler if you’re hungry. Eleanor made ‘em.”
“Thanks, Frank; tell Eleanor I said the same.” Harold reached into the cooler and took out a sandwich; his pole leaned against the side of the boat.  
“Mmm,” Frank grumbled.  
“You know,” Harold chewed slowly, “I think there were more fish last year.”

“Maybe you talked less last year.”

“No, I really think we caught more. Global warming or somethin’.”

“That hippie rubbin’ off on you? Global warming…” Frank scoffed. “They ain’t bitin’ ‘cause you don’t shut up long enough to get any fishin’ done.”

“Hm.” Harold tossed a tomato out of his sandwich into the water and watched it float away from the boat. A small fish swam up to nibble on it, and then disappeared again. “Maybe you’re right. Remember the year that Sam Wilson caught that two-foot carp, then his dog stole it?”

Frank laughed. “Yeah, I remember that. I also remember when he told us after we’d already seen it that it was a four-foot carp, and that we’d never prove any differn’t.”

Harold paused. “I saw his wife in church last week, she seems to be doin’ alright.”

“Eleanor says she’s makin’ due. It can’t be easy though. Poor woman. Sam was an idiot, but he wasn’t a bad guy.”

“Yeah.”

“I hate to think that we’re that old, but I guess we are.” Frank shrugged and flicked his bobber again.

“We are,” Harold said, like he’d never been more certain of anything in his life. “We really are. More than we’d admit, sometimes, I think.”

“It ain’t all bad though, you said you was gonna be a great-granddaddy?”

Harold sighed. “I’m gonna try.”

“That’s all we can do, I guess.” Frank shrugged.

“Frank?”

“Yeah, Harold?”

“We still on for fishin’ next weekend?”

“Ain’t we been fishin’ every weekend for the last ten years?”

“Yeah, but…” Harold frowned. Frank turned halfway around to look at his back. “I was just checkin’.”

Frank turned back to his bobber. “Any bites, Harold?”

“I’m sick, Frank.”

“Damn sandwiches, woman’s probably tryin’ to poison me,” Frank growled, starting to reel in his line.

“No, not like that. Sick, sick, you know?” Harold stared quietly out at the water.

“Oh.” He paused. “Gonna finish panfish season with me?”

“Probably.”

“Next year? Gills are on a three year cycle, get some big ones next year.”

“Maybe. Probably not.”

“Oh.”
Frank stared out at the water, but didn’t see that his bobber was gone until the pole jerked hard in his hands. He pulled back too fast and the line snapped. He gathered the rest of the line and laid the pole in the bottom of the boat.

“You wanna go in? We ain’t catchin’ anything.” Harold said quietly, jiggling his line again.

“Nah,” replied Frank. “We can stay. It just wouldn’t be right to leave. We haven’t even caught anything yet.”

“Yeah. Shame about that. Just ain’t what we hoped.”

— Emily Beard