

Live Long Days

The river, still lightly swollen following heavy spring rains, was finally slow and low enough for fishing. A rusty, tattered barbed-wire fence, erected to keep back cattle, ran through the thick brush along the top of the river's steep bank. The fence was bent down at a clearing in the brush, kept down by branches and brush and by its barbs, beaten like makeshift nails into a large fallen tree-log.

Side by side on the log and facing the river sat an old man and two young boys. This was a balmy Midwestern spring day. The winter's snow had melted and the day's rain had stopped. A slight breeze blew, saturated with the scent of freshly turned earth. The fish were biting.

"Grandpa, when are we gonna cook those fish?" asked the boy sitting between the old man and the other boy. He glanced back at the tin washbucket on the soggy ground behind them. The bucket contained nearly two dozen fish, some swirling in the muddy water and some floating belly-up. The fish were all about the same size, about the length of a hardback book. They were mostly bullheads and sunfish, plus a single smallmouth bass. River fish.

The old man gazed down at the boy. After drawing in a long breath, he smiled. He started to answer the question, started to say that maybe the boys could come into town with him soon and spend the night, maybe even tomorrow night, a fish-fry with baked potatoes and tall glasses of cold milk, ice cream or sherbet for dessert, checkers or TV afterwards until maybe nine o'clock--that's the latest though. The old man was about to tell the young boys, smooth skinned and tousle headed, that they should ask their parents if they could please spend the night.

But he took too long. The boy was already looking elsewhere, at his bobber. He reeled it in, claiming, "I had a nibble! I had a nibble!"

"Now, you leave that line in there, Jason," the old man exclaimed. "How do you expect to catch any fish if you don't leave your bait in the water?"

Jason stopped twirling the reel handle. "I did have a nibble--but, okay. And I have too caught fish. Almost as many as you and two more than Andy."

Andy, sitting on Jason's other side, looked up. He had been occupied watching a crayfish crawl precariously up the steep, muddy bank. Andy smiled, close-lipped, at his brother. He glanced over at the old man, who just then spat into the river. While rubbing his sore left elbow, Andy watched a minnow dart up and nudge the floating sputum and then dart away and vanish into the deep brown water.

Andy almost answered his brother's veiled challenge, almost asserted that he had actually caught more fish last time out. Instead, he just gazed back down at the crayfish. From that position, he said, "Yea Grampaw, when can we cook our fish?" Fried fish with lots of butter and pepper and plenty of milk to drink and ice-cream afterwards: Andy could see and smell and taste it already.

The old man looked over at Andy, squinted, opened his mouth and then quickly glanced back at the suddenly dipping tip of his pole. He jerked the pole. Upon feeling the tug and struggle of a securely hooked fish, he grinned and began reeling it in, guiding it away from the river-edge roots. Andy smiled broadly and clapped his hands. Jason began reeling in his line, too. Unobserved, the crayfish slid back down the bank and slipped beneath the murky surface.

“It’s a big one. It’s a big one!” Jason shrieked. The fish, twisting and flapping its tail in the air, was a fat river sucker nearly a foot and a half long.

The old man unhooked the fish and tossed it onto the grass behind him. As he watched, the two boys leaped to the ground and raced to the flopping fish. Andy reached it first and picked it up by the back of its head and held it out toward his brother.

“Look at its lips! Look at those big fat lips!” Jason cried. The fish had enormous down-turned lips as fat as the boys’ fingers. The lips opened and closed, opened and closed.

“It wants to kiss you,” Andy said, loud and exuberant. Holding the fish outward, he lunged toward Jason. The boys burst into laughter as Andy chased Jason around in a tight little circle. The old man watched them, gasping between broken chuckles.

“That’s enough now,” he finally said. “You’re gonna lose that fish.” He paused to take a couple breaths. “Now, put it in the bucket.”

Andy ran several more strides and then slowed and walked to the bucket, Jason right behind him. Andy dropped the fish into the bucket. Hand on knees, the two watched the fish slip into the water. It right away began to dart from side to side, banging its head against the bucket wall. The other fish stirred and darted about, too; even the dying ones floating at the surface participated in the frenzied and desperate activity by swimming around feebly on their backs.

The old man turned back toward the river. After rebaiting his hook and casting out, he sat and watched his and Andy’s bobbers. Beside him lay Jason’s abandoned pole. He listened to the boys behind him, laughing and shouting as they chased and raced. The air turned cooler as the late afternoon strolled toward evening. A few crows intermittently cawed. A small, bull-less herd of cattle grazed nearby; one, light brown with big black splotches and a white-starred nose, occasionally looked over at the boys and nonchalantly bellowed. A narrow tributary stream flowed out of a scraggly woods two hundred yards away and meandered through the meadow to the river that it fed right beside the fishing spot. There they fished at the foot of a small hill that cut across the entire meadow. On the hilltop plateau beyond the barbed-wire fence sat the boys’ home. They lived there with a sister, their father, and their mother--the old man’s daughter.

The boys clambered back onto the log. This time, Andy sat beside his grandfather. Perhaps in retaliation, Jason grabbed Andy’s pole, claimed it as “Mine now,” and commenced jiggling the round red and white bobber. The old man took two small jackets from his lap, one bright red and one bright blue, and held them out toward the boys.

“Put these on before you catch a chill,” he said. He wanted to add, after catching a breath, that if they caught a chill they’d be unable to spend the night at his house. The boys were already busy though, were involved in a vigorous debate over which one would get which jacket; they both wanted the red one.

The old man studied the two occupied boys--their bright red lips, glowing pink skin, sparkling blue eyes, and quick, clean, enthusiastic motions.

He considered his own hardened blackened lungs, decimated by emphysema and cancer. How his early tastes and habits had subtly turned into tyrannical addictions, how they had gained control of and dominated his waking hours, how he did not know; he often wondered but he did not know. He felt little bitterness or regret, though. Nobody had ever promised him that life wouldn’t get messy; nobody but fools even implied it.

“If only I could breathe easy again.” He gazed at the boys, now temporarily quiet and contemplative, and he wondered what habits and vices would invade their futures. He could not imagine it. Appetites? These two have appetites for everything, he told himself; surely they’d never sacrifice many pleasures for the sake of only a few. A cow bellowed behind him and several others answered as the herd unhurriedly ascended the small hill. The old man shivered. “God, if only I could breathe.”

Almost home for the soon to awaken summer, a flock of geese flew low overhead in a harmonious V-formation. Their shadow crossed over the river surface and the boys both looked up. Andy pointed and said, “Look Grampaw, look!” Then he and Jason hopped off the log and ran about flapping their arms as if to fly.

As always, the summer would turn hot and sticky, heavy and humid. The boys would spend endless evenings chasing fireflies and splashing in the small backyard pool and playing hide-and-seek in the bushes and nearby cornfield. The old man’s lungs would sink into a merciless state of murky shallowness, his chest tight and racked with pain. “No!” he had already decided--no to the summer-time hothouse. He would die in the time of wetness and fresh cooling breezes, die in the springtime, this springtime.

Soon...soon. Maybe even tomorrow night--or maybe even tonight. No more medicines, numbing and nauseating. No more doctor visits, where probed and questioned. No more hated hospital stays amidst sickness and hopelessness, helpless and afraid beneath sterile white sheets. No more!

My God, he mused, gripping tight the log, maybe I’ll even puff on one of my old pipes tonight. Watch the late news and then a talk show or a movie. And sip on some coffee, rich hot coffee with brandy and cream. How long since that? And smoke the pipe and maybe get out a stack of cards for a game of solitaire. Yes, solitaire after the movie, that and more coffee and brandy, perhaps brandy alone. Wait up all through the night on the front porch swing. To hell with troubled, unprofitable sleep. Stay up for the sunrise. Die with the expanding dawn, fading as if into sleep, painless,

peaceful, alone and dignified, tired but untroubled. One last stance, one final night worth living. Yes. Then escape, noiselessly escape before the automobiles and the schoolchildren and the rest of the busy world reawakens. Yes, escape....“Yes, tonight.”

As the sickness in his chest crept up into his throat, the old man paled and gripped even harder the log. He wheezed. A foul, familiar taste reached the back of his tongue. He spit out the thick yellow mucous, down into the river water where it clung to a twig and floated away downstream.

He felt a light but persistent tap on his shoulder. Turning slowly around, he was greeted by Andy's smiling face.

“Grampaw, I gotta go to the bathroom.” Andy shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Me too!” said Jason. He jumped up and down, up and down.

The old man chuckled. “Over there,” he said, pointing. “That's your outdoors bathroom.”

The boys scurried to the bushes and disappeared behind them. Loud, joyful giggles and then a short shriek sounded from behind the bushes. A moment later, the boys reappeared. Jason yanked up his zipper as he walked; Andy's remained unzipped. The old man was about to point this out but Jason, quicker, noticed and screamed, “X-y-z, Andy, EX-WHY-ZEEE!”

After a half-hearted swipe at Jason, Andy turned away and zipped up. The boys then raced to the wash bucket and peered down into it.

The old man turned back around to check his bobber. His gaze wandered over the swirling brown water and then upstream at a fallen elm tree, an apparent lightning victim that had come to rest as an efficient bridge over the river. Now, he had long ago spent some swell times on tree-bridges like that one...

An abrupt, angry tug came at the tip of his pole. The pole dipped steeply downward. Caught off guard, the old man tightened his grip and jerked back the pole; it bent and bent. “A flathead cat,” he whispered, excited for the first time in awhile. He reeled two turns against the strong, furious resistance from the river depths. At midstream appeared a rapid whirlpool and then a big, black, smooth and shiny tail flashed out of the water. The fish lunged. The pole, still held tightly in the old man's hands, bent even further. He went to loosen the drag, but—too late; the line snapped. It blew easy in the breeze while the old man's bobber sped downstream and disappeared underwater. He reeled in his weightless line, tied it to the pole tip, and laid the pole lengthwise on the log.

The boys' poles were already there. Through fishing for the day, they now had all of the fish on the ground, lined up from smallest to largest. A few of the fish lay stiff and still. Most of them flapped their gills and sometimes jumped just off the ground, getting nowhere. Lying at the end of the line, the fat river sucker opened and closed, opened and closed its thick lips.

Fishing poles in hand, the old man stepped cautiously down from the log. He watched the river sucker's futile movements for a minute, then said, "Throw them back in, boys."

"No!" Jason said, and he stood up.

"Why, Grampaw?" asked Andy. "Aren't we gonna eat these fish?"

"No," was the reply. "I'm sorry boys. Grandpa is just too tuckered out to clean them tonight."

"I thought you said to never kill a fish if you're not gonna eat it," said Jason. "Some of these are already dead." He toed a small, still fish.

"Well, throw them back in before the rest of them die!" answered the old man. "Besides," he added, "nothing that dies in nature is ever wasted."

The two boys, already engaged in returning the fish to the river, missed these last words. Regarding fishing-matters, they would never argue long with their grandfather: who else often took them fishing? Who else knew better how to catch fish? At last, Jason picked up the sucker and, with Andy beside him watching, tossed it into the river.

Shortly, the threesome walked homeward through the meadow. A jet flew high overhead. Soundless to the ground, it left behind a long cigar-shaped cloud, solitary in the subtly darkening sky.

The boys skipped ahead and then stopped and waited on their slow-moving grandfather. They skipped ahead again, and they stopped and waited again. When he once more drew near, Jason said, "Sing that railroad song, Grandpa!"

"Yeah, the railroad song," added Andy as he tugged on the old man's sleeve.

The old man chuckled. "Okay, okay," he began shyly, softly, in an age-roughened voice.

"I've been wor-kin on the rail-road, all my live-long days."

He paused to breathe.

"I'm the engine," yelled Jason. He shuffled his short legs stiffly and pumped his arms furiously. "CHUGA-chuga, CHUGA-chuga."

"I'm the caboose!" shouted Andy. He attached his hands to Jason's narrow waist and shuffled his legs, too. He then reached up and pulled at the air as if on a whistle-rope. "Woo-woo, WOO-WOO!"

Walking right behind them, the old man heard all this, saw it all with glistening eyes.

"Oh, I've been wor-kin on the rail-road, just a pas-sing time a-way."

Suddenly a dinner bell clanged from the direction of the boy's home, clanged again, and then was silent.

"Time to go home," said Jason. He reached back and disengaged Andy's hands from his waist.

"Yes," agreed the old man. He reached down with gnarled fingers and roughed up Andy's thick blonde hair. "Time to go home."