

# The Fish

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Pa is gone for good and Ma sleeps in front of the television set even more now.

So the Grampa I don't know comes by one day and says, do you want to go fishing. I say, O.K., because it was nice when I went with Pa. I say O.K. even though this Grampa scares me, he's so big. His eyes are black like mine but the hair above them sticks out like spider legs.

Grampa drives a station wagon that's pink and wood. I sit up front and watch the houses disappear, then the woods going by. Grampa has laid out newspaper behind the back seat, for all the fish we'll catch, he says, and the paper rattles in the breeze from the open window. Grampa says, I used to take your Pa fishing, but he doesn't sound happy when he says it.

I follow Grampa down a crumbly path through the woods. I smell water getting closer and then see it shining yellow through the leaves. Grampa pulls a branch up and away and it's like he just opened a garage door on lake, sky and hills on the other side. We cross the rocks and sand and stand at the water's edge. The lake has tiny waves that slap at our shoes.

Grampa is crouched over his metal box, jangling around, fixing up the fishing poles. The sun is behind us, behind the trees too and the lake looks like a window I can't see through, it's so smooth. I pick up a flat rock, perfect round like a machine made it and try to skim it across the lake like my Pa taught me, snapping my arm, but the rock falls in with a splash.

Grampa stands up fast, looks at the water then at me, his eyes big and black. You throw a rock?, he says, you throw a rock in the water and we're trying to fish? His voice goes up and he looks at me like I'm someone else. I'm trying to skim them, I say. He says, don't do that, what's the matter with you? He's very tall now and I want him to stop growing. You scare the fish, we won't catch any and then what're we out here for, he says.

I shake my head because my words can't come out, they're trapped inside my belly and they burn. Grampa stomps over to his fishing pole and picks it up. I walk over to where the woods begin and pick up another rock. If I was sure I could reach Grampa's head, I would throw it at him but I don't think I can throw that high. I throw the rock into the woods hard like I'm trying to throw myself inside out, like maybe some air on my insides will help cool them. The rock whips through the leaves and Grampa yells, what the hell's the matter with you? His words bounce around in the trees. Get your ass over here, he calls, and I do.

Grampa pushes the fishing pole into my hands, here, he says like the next thing coming is a punch. We stand still. The sky is turning orange and the woods around us are getting dark. The lake looks purple and red like all the fish in it are bleeding.

Grampa is a giant shadow beside me. He stands close and I can smell him, man-sweat, soap and something else, something familiar. His smell mixes with the fishy smell of the water. Grampa doesn't touch me and he doesn't talk. The tiny waves hit

our feet and ploink noises out on the lake sound like fish are trying to escape. Some stars turn on above the hills across the water.

Then, a splashing noise, Grampa says, bah!, and begin to turn his reel. The water plops white and Grampa pulls a fish out of it, wriggling and jumping from side to side. Hah, see?, Grampa says and grabs the fish in a big hand. He works the hook out of it's mouth and I want to scream, to give the fish a voice to scream with, but I look at the eye that can't blink instead. Grampa holds the wiggling fish and spears it through the gill on a short chain of hooks. He lays it all on the rocks. The fish flaps and stops, flaps and stops.

You beginning to learn now?, Grampa says, you beginning to see? He's happy now. You got to stand still, he says, patience, you hear? I nod and want to scream again.

Grampa rebaits his hook, casts and slowly reels the line. A mosquito buzzes around my ear and then lands on my neck, sticks it's nose into my skin. I slap at it and at the same time, my reel begins to whine. It's rolling out and I feel too slow to grab it but finally I do and begin to turn it the wrong way and the splashing fish is getting more line to run with. Grampa yells, reel it in, you jackass, reel it in! He pulls the pole out of my hands. I slip on the stones and fall, smash my elbow. Grampa reels in and in but the line is empty at the end.

Goddam it, Grampa says and looks at me. He's a shadow blocking out the stars in a man's shape. I sit on the ground and hold my elbow. It feels wet but I won't cry, I just look at him. Lost me a hook, Grampa says like he's so mad he's afraid.

I get and wipe my hand on my pants. I walk over to the edge of the water. My throat feels like something crawling up from my gut stopped there, but I won't cry. I unzip my pants and pull myself out. What're you doing over there?, Grampa wants to know. I don't answer and pee into the water instead. The sound is nice like a little song, like the jewelry box Ma has.

Hey, hey!, Grampa shouts and runs over. He grabs the back of my neck and picks me up, swinging me around away from the water. You little fucker, he calls me, you fucking pig! His voice is shakey but he doesn't throw me down. He holds me and looks at me. Maybe he'll hook me on the chain next to the fish, I think, but he shakes his head and just puts me down like he doesn't want me on his hands anymore.

Grampa is breathing hard and packing up the gear. He doesn't say anything when he starts off towards the road. I zip back up and try to follow Grampa's jingling noise and his white socks as they bounce up and down.

Grampa is behind the wheel of the station wagon when I reach it. The motor and the headlights are on. Maybe he'll drive away and leave me here, I think and then picture myself swimming in the dark. Grampa reaches back and opens a door. You sit in back, he says like he's sorry to use words with me.

Behind me in the rear, the fish Grampa caught slaps weakly against the newspaper. My insides are cold now, the burning is out. I am not a fish but I am hooked through the mouth like a cold finger in my brain.