SHORT FICTION/ESSAYS

CATCH AND KILL

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I admit it was my idea. “I’d love to keep a few, enough for dinner anyway. Bring your stringer,” I told Rudy.

Fourth of July weekend, when our place was packed full of children, grandchildren, and cousins, it was time. Our son, Rudy, is a catch and release guy. He has every conceivable type of plastic lure: worms, crayfish, squids, and leeches. He also uses real worms from Big Mike’s which he stores in my refrigerator. If you didn’t recognize the telltale blue Styrofoam, you might mistake it for vegetable dip. By letting him keep the container in my refrigerator, I am an accessory.

This has a history. Once, years ago, he and I decided to clean and gut an especially large fish.

“You said you’d do it!” I complained as we went behind the woodpile to do the deed.

“Heck, no! You said you would do it. That was the deal.”

“No way. You do it.”

“Absolutely not. We had an agreement.”

“Well, okay, you kill it and I’ll finish.”

We were a regular comedy team.

We got a flat board. We found a knife. First he tried, then I tried sawing its head off. It flapped its large tail. Its mouth opened and closed. My hands trembled. I was in tears. Rudy was angry. He grabbed the knife. The sound of the knife slicing through skin was sharp and grating. By the time he was done, there were blood and bones everywhere and just a couple of mouthfuls of fish to eat. Since then, it’s reel ’em in and put ’em back.

Right off the dock Rudy catches three pounders. At least that’s what they look like to me. What do I know? I just dodge the lines. Usually there’s a kid or two with a bamboo pole, another with a rod and reel, and Rudy, supervising. He acknowledges every fish caught, big and small, as a lakeside sacrament. Sometimes a photo is taken.

After Rudy or a child pulls in a fish, Rudy names the type and size, unhooks its tortured mouth; his glossy black lab retriever Momo, standing by, jumps up and licks it; everyone laughs at the dog; and Rudy flips the fish back in the water. The feistier ones or the sharp-toothed northerns who have slipped out of his hand slither back off the dock into the lake with an assist from the edge of someone’s foot.

I’ve caught a fish or two in my lifetime. When I was five my great Uncle Reuben took me out in his little wooden boat and showed me how to string a

worm. Something about Reuben — gentle voice with the thick Yiddish accent, ruddy cheeks, an old dirty cap, and his bright blue eyes shining at me from just under the brim — of course, I couldn't disappoint him. We caught sunny after sunny, their golden bodies glimmering in the late afternoon sun. I don't remember feeling anything but loved, and the fat, pink worm as Uncle Reuben eased its body around the sharp hook. It took technique. It took steady fingers. It took delicate artistry and concentration. I've not threaded a worm since.

Then there was the time I caught a perch shore fishing in Venice, California. When my girlfriend's husband Gene, split open the belly of my prize to gut it, she was full of fry. Rows of fry, fifteen or so little fish, all perfect - perfect little eyes, perfect little noses, perfect little fins, all unborn, like little, silvery soldiers, lined up facing the same direction, ready to hatch. Instead, I executed them in one cast. That was it for me.

I could tell you more, like the time our family went deep sea fishing in Acapulco and my sister caught a sailfish. Our Mexican captain spread it over the prow of the boat for us to admire. It gave meaning to the word awesome. He smiled as he opened its deep violet, accordion sail, shining iridescent in the sun. Within minutes, the fish lay limp, its pride paled to dull brown.

I'm fine with just watching this dock activity, except when fish gasp for air while Rudy uses a pliars to remove the hook. Or when they flop around on the dock, struggling blind to find water, where they can wriggle and dive through the private darkness of lake weeds. Once the fish return to the lake, I utter a secret prayer to the lake gods: *Please take care of all your returnees. Please help them breathe. Please let them have a normal life.* I picture hundreds of them swimming around with ragged mouths and little angel halos magically suspended over their heads.

But I've been known to be greedy, like this time when I decided it was overdue to keep a few to eat. Our lake is small. There's no public access or motors allowed. It's filled with thousands of northern, bass, sunnies, perch, and bluegills. Most of the guys in nondescript hats rowing silently by in Alumacrafts will say we need to slim down crowded conditions underwater. It's our responsibility. A duty to serve.

Out of nine residents on our lake maybe only Babs and her boys keep fish for food. More than once she has offered to clean my fish.

As I was saying, this Fourth of July I had a houseful — seven kids and six adults. They were bringing in fish by the dozen and tossing them back. Rudy knew my mind. Babs would be ready.

So when Rudy's older son, Jaguar, reeled in an impressive small mouth bass, Rudy said, "Get in the boat. Now!" He has a way about him. You love him and you resent him at the same time. He barks orders like a drill sergeant, but he's my son and I can't bring him up again. I tried once and anyone else might have done a better job.

I took my place at the bow, still wet from my last swim, towel wrapped around my waist. Behind us was the single bass on the end of a stringer, rocking and rolling in the small wake of the boat. His gills were bright yellow, the color of the stringer that served as guillotine and noose. He was the size of a small cat. Three of the boys, with Jag in the middle looking proud, took up the center seat. Rudy rowed down to the end of the lake to Babs' place.

Momo swam after us, trying to jump in the bow. He takes his jobs seriously: chief fish-licker and masthead. He tried to bite the twirling fish. Rudy discouraged him with his oar. He tried to climb in. I pushed him away. Reluctantly, he bounded back to shore and followed us along the shoreline until we got to Babs' cabin. He's in the water so much his coat shines like black enamel. When he's not in the water patrolling back and forth for fish, he's on the dock or in the boat.

"Babs!" I shouted. I untied the stringer from the boat and headed up the long wooden staircase. There she stood at the top, waiting, as if she were expecting us. "Still wanna do the job?" I held up the fish.

"Looks like you got yourself a good one," she said.

"Yup. Remember Jag? He's the fisherman. Remember Babs, Jag?" They nodded at each other. Jag squeezed ahead of me. He held up the fish and said, "Yah, I caught it with a plastic worm."

"C'mon out back," she said, a minister officiating at an important religious rite. Jag's little brother, Tran, their first cousin, Marv, Rudy and I followed her around back of her one-room cabin, the one without electricity, hot water or plumbing. Behind her cabin, by the outhouse, was a fish-cleaning station complete with a fish fillet knife, long hose, and schpritzer for rinsing off the fish.

She picked up her knife. "Before you do that, can ya weigh it?" Rudy asked.

"Oh sure, be right back," Babs said, disappeared into her house and returned with a little weighing gizmo the size of a cell phone charger. It had a hook on the end of it and a little moveable gauge. She stabbed the fish's mouth with the hook several times, puncturing it all around, some perforations stretching into circular holes, until she found a spot under the lip that wouldn't rip and was thick enough to hold. "Two and a half pounds," she said, lifting it up. She whipped a tape measure out of thin air, transmogrifying from minister to magician, "18 ½ inches long."

"The size of a newborn baby," I whispered. The fish was still alive. Its eyes were slate. Unreadable. Eternal. Its accordion gills were pleated bright red, flaring open and shut. Its long underside was pale lemon edged by a deep green body.

Babs began her sermon, intended to soothe. "Your fish is feeling pretty numb by now. It was on a stringer off the side of the boat. It's been out of the water a good while so it won't feel much." Her face carries a plump sweetness,

like a ripe strawberry. She brought out the knife. A glint of sunlight struck its edge.

The boys' noses met the edge of the fish station, a north country's baptismal font. Rudy stood guard behind them, his hands on Tran's shoulders.

I remember Rudy, age four, covering his own genitals at his little brother's circumcision. If he could have melted into the walls, he would have.

The boys were starting to ask questions. My ears were buzzing. I heard nothing but my own voice. *How could I have done this? They were so innocent.* I tiptoed backwards and turned toward the boat landing. I hurried down the steps to the boat. It was scorching hot. If I got in the boat, I'd scald my legs.

I thought back to other times Babs came in handy. One weekend last summer, she spotted some guys in a boat with a motor on our lake. Before I could get down to my dock to talk to them, she was on my lawn, shouting - gently of course, but with volume.

No one does that around here. No one ever trespasses. It's very private.

"Fellas. Hey, fellas!" Babs put the full strength of her ample girth behind her voice. "There's an ordinance on the lake thatcha can't be on the water with a motor! So wherever you came from, you'd better g'wan back now. Otherwise, I'll have to call the sheriff. 'Preciate it."

As she was shouting, I remembered the pile of fish guts I'd seen on the road driving in. I hustled over to her and under my breath, said, "Hey, while you're at it, wouldja ask them if they're the ones who left the pile of fish guts down the road? We've got turkey vultures circling overhead."

"Hey, guys, next time, also make sure when you clean your fish ya bury it someplace deep and out of the way? Sure do 'preciate it!"

I didn't hear a reply, but knew they were on their way back to wherever they came from. Next day the fish guts were gone, and the vultures on another journey. Yup. She's a good neighbor to have around.

So, when it came to taking her up on her offer to clean, I took the bait. Hook, line, and sinker. I also convinced my reluctant son.

I hovered around the boat awhile and climbed back up the long flight to the sacrificial altar. All four sets of once-virginal eyes were fixed on the aftermath. Babs handed Rudy a small baggie with cut up fillets. A very large head still attached to the guts and bowels of the bass went into another. I took it.

"Thanks a lot, Babs," I said when her eyes met mine. "Sorry, I just couldn't watch." I was choking on my words.

Babs looked at me, misty-eyed. "When we kill our hunt, we thank the gods for the sacrifice. We thank the gods for our good hunt. We thank the gods for food."

To myself I said, *It's so much easier to go to the grocery store*.

Down we clambered toward the boat. On the way, I picked up a fallen lawn ornament, a penguin, hollow and plastic. Babs stood once again at the top

of the stairs. I tried to right the penguin, but it kept tipping over. I climbed up the hill to get a log from her pile to level the bird. I felt virtuous being able to help her in some way.

"That penguin came from your property, from the first owner. There's one just like it at the opposite end of the lake. They keep watch, " she said.

Weird, I thought. *This isn't exactly Antarctica. What's wrong with a bald eagle?*

"Penguins symbolize agility, order and the ability to move through various dimensions of life."

"Really? Hmm. I'll work on that."

I waved, thanked her again, as Rudy whipped off my towel from my waist and gave it to his children to sit on.

"What am I supposed to sit on?"

Rudy handed me his shirt, an afterthought, but a generous and fitting gesture.

Off we rowed. All were silent on the row back home. As soon as our dock came into view, Jag spoke through the stupefied air.

"I never knew they could do that," he said to no one in particular.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Wag their tails after they're cut."

We got out of the boat. "Come with me to bury the guts," I said to Jag. He followed me. I got a shovel. The deer flies were bad. I found a spot in the sun by the rose bush. I dug hard, cutting the sharp spade into the earth, slicing through roots, digging and digging. The hole had to be big enough to keep away bears and vultures who feel no remorse, but smell a carcass for miles. No hole seemed deep enough to hide the trophy fish. His head was half the size of Jag's.

Jag started to wail and ran away. "Come back here!" I yelled. "This is your fish. You help me bury it!"

"But the deer flies are biting me!"

"Right, they're biting me too! Now get back here and help!"

There was nothing for him to do but bear witness. I had the shovel and he had nothing but my words. He came back and stood by, stamping the ground and whining, as I poured the fish remains from the baggie into the hole. The fish slid in, spiraling, mouth up, eyes round and black. "Now help me cover it up!"

"With what?" he wailed.

"Our hands!"

I leaned over in my wet bathing suit and brought the shoveled dirt over the hole. Flies drew blood from my back. We couldn't keep them away. Jag kept smacking at his legs, half-heartedly kicking a small bit of earth over the hole with the toe of his sandal. I was on my knees, scratching and pulling at the soil.

"C'mon, Jag. You were so proud of your fish. Now let's finish the job!" I wanted him to know how precious the life of the fish was. I wanted him to understand what happens when you kill something. I wanted him to suffer the

way I was suffering. I wanted him to feel my grief and moisten the mound, the small graveyard by my rosebush, with his tears.