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“The Mighty Fishermen”
by Darryl Benjamin

The last time I saw my father was when I was eleven. That was in 1974. We – my mother, father and I – were living in a little house we had barely been able to afford near Boston, Massachusetts, not far from the New Hampshire border. My father was thirty-six at the time. My mother was four years older than my father, though it had never been a problem.

We were living off my father’s unemployment checks, with my mother doing some part-time waitressing in Newton, mostly on weekends. We rarely spent any “family time” because my mother was gone during the weekends (she slept over at a friend’s house in Boston Friday nights) and my father, when he worked, was gone during the day. I never thought it was strange that the three of us didn’t do much together; that is the way it always was. Sometimes on weekends my father would take me on a trip, usually to Vermont, where we’d stay in a motel during the evenings and bicycle during the day, or go to restaurants, or just hang out together.

My father was a genius and crazy about airplanes. He had been a bombardier for the Air Force during World War II, the guy who pushed the button to release the bombs. Once, even, he had one of his engines shot out over Germany, but managed to land in

England. He had a Purple Heart that he kept in a tin box in the basement. He didn't talk much about the war, except about flying. And to remind us that he had an IQ of 172, which had been tested in the Air Force. I think now he must've had some kind of scarring experience over there, because his face grew dark and his eyes half-closed whenever he talked about the war. Maybe he killed someone, I don't know for sure, but he never said otherwise. He was a tall, dark-skinned man with salt and pepper hair, and had a dry sense of humor. He had put himself through college in Brooklyn, New York, by working days and studying at night. When I was growing up he was constantly finding new jobs as a mechanical engineer and then getting fired from them. He would come home and rant about *Boobus Americanus*, which is what he called all people he thought were stupider than him. Which were most people.

What I want to talk about happened in November. My father had been out of work for two months, and the unemployment checks would soon stop. My mother had just finished working extra hours because someone had unexpectedly quit. She was stressed because of all the extra hours she had to work. It was something that happened occasionally, but this time she seemed fed up.

My mother and father had pretty much stopped talking. He spent his time in the basement building model airplanes, Flying Tigers, Boeing B-17s and F6F Grumman Hellcat fighters. Once he took me out to the park with his latest plane, a Flying Tiger, and the tiny gasoline powered engine caught fire. He spit on it until it went out. But the plane was ruined. Another time, he flew his model into the only rock in the park. He laughed about it, but I never understood why he found it funny after all the hours he had spent

carefully putting the plane together in the basement that always smelled like Duco cement. I tried to assemble some model boats in my room, but always failed. My father always said I didn't have enough patience, but I suspected what he meant was smarts.

I came home from school on Friday as usual at three fifteen to the sound of shouting voices. I don't think they saw me as I passed into my room. I caught a glimpse of my father, standing with a model airplane in his hand, gesturing angrily at my mother.

"What kind of example are you setting for Max?" my mother said in an unnatural voice.

"I want to take him fishing this weekend," my father said. "It's our last chance before the winter sets in."

"He doesn't want to fish. He wants to stay home this weekend," she said.

"Yes, I do," I said, yelling from my room. My father had never taken me fishing before. We'd bicycled, and hiked, but never fished.

There was a long silence from their bedroom. I went into their bedroom. My mother's face was red, and she was blinking rapidly, the way she did when she was upset. "When did you get home?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," my father said, grinning, "he said he wants to go."

"Your father's crazy," my mother said, "he should be home looking for a job. Not playing with his toys and fishing." My father looked at both of us, and my mother's left eye twitched and stared at me accusingly, as if I had betrayed her. She was very pretty, though when she was mad her features were bloated and less than attractive. "Fine, go ahead. I don't give a damn," she said to no one in particular. "Go on your little boy's trip.

Now get out of here, I have to get ready for work.” She turned to the closet door and opened it, pretending to pick out an outfit.

“Why don’t you come with us, Jackie?” my father asked, still smiling, pleased. “Call in sick tonight. After all the work you recently did, I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“And go fishing with you?” my mother said. She turned away from the closet and faced the window. The trees outside the window had already lost their leaves.

“It’ll be fun,” my father said. “We’ll catch fish and maybe even some turtles.”

“I’ve never fished in my life,” my mother said.

“They stock the lake, it’ll be easy,” my father said. “They have large-mouth bass, delicious for eating.”

“We can’t afford it,” my mother said. To be honest, I wished she didn’t come. I didn’t want them to fight, and I wasn’t used to her being around on my trips out with my father. I don’t think I had ever seen her so angry at him.

“I got my last check today,” my father said. “Let’s blow it on a good time. I’ll find work next week, I promise.”

“You should be so lucky,” my mother said, turning away toward the door.

“You’ll see,” my father said. But the door slammed behind her, and he looked at me then with a look I think now as sadness, though I could not see a way to change anything.

My mother sat in the backseat of our old Rambler and looked out the window while we drove. We would have to rent fishing poles, a boat, everything. I was excited. I

had a feeling that something important was about to happen to me, and that this would be a day I would always remember.

My mother did not say anything for a long time, and neither did I. We drove through Hartford and took Route 89 South.

“I heard that turtles can make you blind,” my mother said. “I hope you know that.”

“I know that,” my father said in the front seat. “but that’s only when they’re immature. Bacteria makes their shells soft so they can grow. If you don’t wash your hands after touching them, the bacteria can blind you.”

“So where will you look for work?” she said. “I just want to know.”

“The usual places,” my father said, “the newspapers, mostly.”

“What if you can’t find anything?” my mother asked. “What then?”

“I’ll find something.”

“I’m going to look for a job as a Girl Friday,” she said suddenly, and this was something I had never heard about before. I turned to look at her, but she was staring out her window and wouldn’t see me.

“We used to sing a song in the service,” my father said, “*Match in the gas tank, boom, boom!*” He glanced at me and smiled. “I think that’s a great idea, Jackie. When are you going to start looking?” I wasn’t sure if he meant it, or was merely humoring her.

“I don’t want Max to think he’s going to be out on the street if you can’t find work,” my mother said.

“Max doesn’t think he’ll be out in the street, do you Max?”

I shook my head. “No way.”

Where my father took us was through a series of small rolling hills that filled my belly with a giddy pleasure. Colorful leaves of yellow and red still clung to trees while others were as barren as skeletons. I remember there was only a slight chill in the air, and the sky was clear and blue, and down in the distance we could see the small town of Danfield, and the state highway running past it toward New York City and the Amtrak rails. We drove down a hill until we hit a dirt road and pulled into a dusty parking lot of a motel.

“We’re here,” he said, looking up in the rearview mirror at my mother. “It may not look like much but it’s got a lot of memories,” my father said.

“You never took me here before,” my mother said. “If it’s so important to you, I wonder why you never took me here.”

My father shrugged. “It’s a great place,” he said, as if he couldn’t wait to share some secret knowledge with us. I had looked around myself but could not see anything. No water or trees, nothing seemed like a good place to fish. Just rocks and dust. “There’s a big lake out there, Max,” my father said. “You can’t see it now from here because it’s low. The fishing’s great. You’ll see.”

“The only thing I see is this broken down motel in the middle of nowhere,” my mother said. She was staring out beyond the motel as if she could actually see something in particular, and wanted to know more about it. “How’d you find this place?”

“My father used to take me fishing here when I was kid,” my father said.

“Did it look so beaten-up then, too?”

My father smiled. “No, not as I remember it. It was in good shape, then.”

“Well it looks like hell now.”

“That’s ok,” he said. “We’re not here for the lodging. We’re here for the fishing. Isn’t that right, Max?”

“And the turtles,” I reminded him.

“At least your father worked,” my mother said. “At least he took you here on vacations, not when he should have been working.”

“That’s not fair,” my father said, and looked gloomily out over the motel to where I assumed the lake was. Though for myself I believed my mother was probably right, I didn’t care. I didn’t care about anything at that moment except fishing and maybe finding some turtles.

“Why don’t you come with us?” My father asked, brightening. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’m certainly not going out there,” my mother said.

“That’s okay,” my father said after a moment. “When we come back with a load of bass you’ll see how well we’ve done. That’s all I wanted. Max and me will catch them, won’t we, Max?”

“Sure,” I said, and I put my hand on the door handle which, as usual, almost didn’t turn because it was so old.

“Then we should get started,” my father said, “or we’ll never catch anything.”

We got out of the car and checked into the motel. My father carried our bags to the room. My father changed into a flannel shirt and dirty jeans. My mother just sat on the bed staring at us. "Make sure he wears a life jacket," my mother said.

"I don't want to wear a life jacket," I protested.

"Don't worry," my father said to my mother. "We're just fishing from the dock today."

As we closed the door I caught a glimpse of my mother sitting on the bed, her chin resting on her right palm, thinking what I could not then begin to say.

My father rented rods and tackle and a weekend fishing license from the man at the front desk. As we walked toward the lake, he began talking to me. Although I had been alone with him a lot during our trips together, I had never felt completely comfortable. I had the feeling he somehow disapproved of me, that my grades in school were never high enough, I was too nervous a person, I spoke before I thought. Usually he just made small talk and didn't talk much about himself. As we walked my father told me that as a kid his father had taken him fishing once in this very lake and thrown him overboard to teach him to swim. He was very young at the time, three years old, but he swam. He said it was easy to find work, but difficult to keep a job because the people he worked for were morons. They didn't like his attitude, they thought he was uppity when all he was trying to do was introduce some ideas they had never thought of. I had the feeling my father was trying to apologize for something, but couldn't find the right words. He said one day he would start his own company and buy an airplane and take me fishing all

around the country. He said that when he was flying he felt free and clear from responsibility and worry, like he was above the world. He said one day Jackie would understand. One day he'd make her see, if she was only patient. It seemed as if had forgotten I was there, that he was talking to himself.

"I'm going to have my own business some day," I said. "I like to sing. I'm going to be a rock and roll singer."

My father nodded.

"I like to sing; maybe I'll learn to play the guitar, too."

"I thought you like to build things," my father said, and smiled.

"Not really."

"I love to," he said. "I wish I could make a living out of building things."

I looked out straight ahead over the green tops of the maple trees that grew to the edge of the hill in front of us, hoping to see the lake my father said was there. There was a sweet smell of tiger lilies I thought might be at the place we were going, but I couldn't see it. "How will we catch the fish?" I asked.

"Worms. You can pierce one through the midsection with the hook, take the wriggling ends and pierce them, too, into a tight knot. Or you can thread the worm through one end and push it through little by little until it's strung like a stuck turkey."

I shuddered at the thought.

"It won't be hard," my father said. "Fishing in a stocked lake never is. Fishing in the ocean is more challenging. You have to outthink the fish. You have to be clever. But

we don't have time for that here," He glanced at me. "You have to be sure you're going to catch something the first time here."

"How do you know it's stocked," I asked. And I looked toward the mountains twenty miles away, half in light and half dark blue at the bottom. I could see the little town of Danfield then, looking shabby and dimly lighted in the distance. Smoke rose slowly from a building. A car switched on its lights as dusk began to fall.

"They always stock it November first," my father said.

"How many are we going to catch?"

"Does it make any difference?" my father asked.

"No, it doesn't."

We walked then for a while without talking. I looked back once to see the motel small at the bottom of the hill we had climbed. I thought that my mother must've read a little in her romance novel and then gone to sleep, which she always did. Behind the motel the sun was nearing the mountains southwest of us, and I knew that when the sun was gone it would be cold. I wished my mother had decided to come along with us, and I thought for a moment of how little I really knew her at all.

My father walked with me another quarter-mile, we crossed a dense field where wild flowers were growing, then went a hundred yards through tall grass and dandelions until we came to another small hill and I realized the lake was just beyond us. I could hear the sound of the water lapping against the shore and the wind blowing quietly against the tops of the trees, rustling the remaining leaves that clung to the branches. I stood and listened to the sound of the waves and tried to imagine all the fish in the lake

just waiting for us. I shivered at the sight of the lake extending in curves to the horizon, a sight that made you hold your breath with expectancy. It was sight that made you feel as if you were of no importance in the grand scheme of things.

“How many fish do you think are in there, Max?” my father asked.

“A hundred,” I said. “Maybe more.”

“Thousands,” my father said. “More than you can believe. Let’s go.”

I put down my rod on the dock and took out a worm to thread onto the hook. It wriggled violently at my touch and it slipped from my hands between the slats. I heard it plunk into the water and looked at my father.

“Try again,” he said.

Stabbing another worm this time with the hook made me nauseous. But I kept my face passive. I didn’t want my father to think I was incapable of putting a three inch worm on a hook. I finished quickly and dipped my hands into the water to rinse off the dirt and guts. My father already had his line in the water.

“Be careful not to cross lines,” he said.

“Look,” my father said from the opposite end of the dock, in a whisper. “They travel in schools.”

“I could see half a dozen fish, about eight inches long, approaching.

“When you feel a nibble, yank up to hook them,” my father said.

“Got one,” my father exclaimed, jerking a fish out of the water just as I felt a nibble. I jerked up, but only a hook popped from the water, without the worm.

“You have to make sure the worm is secured,” my father smiled as he pinned his fish to the dock and worked the hook from its gulping mouth. He threw the fish into a blue pail we had brought. “Like shooting fish in a barrel,” my father said.

He was happy then, and I felt happy, too, knowing that he was pleased. We were losing our light, and the air was purplish and cooling. I looked toward the motel but couldn't see it, and I was no longer sure where it was below the lighted sky.

“Where do they sleep?” I said in a whisper, since I did not want anything to be ruined because of what I did or said. It was important to my father to catch the fish, and it was important to me.

“Usually under the docks,” he said. “Or along the shoreline. I wish your mother had come, Max. Now she'll be sorry.”

I couldn't see any fish in the water and I wondered if they knew we were here now. “She might be,” I said with my heart pounding, but I didn't think she would be much.

It was a simple plan he had. To maximize the efficiency, my father said, he would go to another dock and fish so they didn't get the idea we were there. He'd come back in fifteen minutes with the pail for the fish I'd caught.

“Don't make any loud sounds,” my father warned. “They might not have ears, but they are sensitive to vibrations.”

“All right,” I said, “I'll try it.”

“It won't be hard.” He patted me on the arm and smiled. Then he took the pail and disappeared into the gathering dusk.

Then I was alone. And I didn't mind it. I sat down on the dock and looked at the worms squirming in their Styrofoam cup. I lifted my line from the water to check that the worm was still on the hook, and it was, limp and dead looking. The wind rose a little and made me shiver. The first snow of the season wasn't far off.

Then I thought about my mother in the motel, alone, and what it was like for her to be fighting with my father so much. I wondered when my father would find a job, or whether my mother would divorce him and how I would feel about it. And though I didn't know why, it occurred to me that my father and my mother were already divorced, and it surprised me that I didn't feel any different.

Then I thought about singing in a rock and roll band, what it would be like. To have all those people cheering for me. How proud I would be, and how important I would feel.

And then I felt a nibble again, and I became aware the air had turned colder. And I heard the splash of water as my father wrestled a fish from the lake. I jerked up hard and felt the hook catch. A fish struggled against the line and I jumped to my feet. I pulled it flopping crazily onto the dock and tried to pin it with my foot the way I had seen my father. Before I could, it bucked itself off the dock back into the water. I yanked the pole high into the air and let it wriggle around on the line. I can do this, I told myself. I lowered it gently to the dock again, dropped the pole and pinned it with my foot. I felt it lurch against the sole of my shoe but held it fast. The fish had swallowed the worm and hook deep into its throat. I felt its clammy lips on my fingers as I tried to worry it free. The more I moved the hook, the deeper it embedded into the soft tissue. I squinted into

the night to see if I could see my father, but there was no sign of him. The fish was gasping for air now, and I didn't know what to do. The last hint of sunlight had faded and stars began to dot the sky, as many as fish in the lake, I remember thinking. I waited for my father to return and stared at the sky. I didn't care for fishing after all, I decided, and kept my eyes pointed upward, away from the lake, away from the fish, away from my father.

His face loomed near me, distorted and strange. "Looks like you caught one, Max," he said. He put his pail down and I could see he had five or six fish flopping around at the bottom in a tiny bit of water. My father bent down to examine the fish I had caught. "It's a big one," he said, and ripped the hook out by the fishing line in one sudden, swift stroke. It made a terrible, wet sound and the fish shuddered, its eyes misting over. My father picked it up and tossed it into the pail on top of the other fish. It landed with a dull *plop* and flipped its tail.

My father baited his hook and cast his line out as I sat down on the dock. "That sometimes happens, Max," my father said.

He stared at the maimed fish and shook his head. "But that's what they're there for, fishing. Maybe this is exactly what they're put on earth for."

I did not know what to say because I did not know what he could mean by that, though what I felt was sadness and a dulled feeling like hunger because I had put my rod down and it was over for me now.

"What's happened to the mighty fishermen out here?" I heard a voice speak. It was my mother, standing in her jeans on the knoll above us, hugging her arms. She was

smiling though she was cold. And I realized that I had lost all thought of her while fishing. She glanced at the pail. “Who did all this fishing? Is this your work, Max?”

“No,” I said.

“Max is a natural fisherman, though, Jackie,” my father said. “He takes his time.” He was holding his rod in his hand, and he was smiling. He and my mother seemed pleased.

“I see you didn’t miss too many,” my mother said and smiled. I could tell she admired my father for his fish, and that she had done some thinking while she was alone. “They *really* must be biting,” she said, “I’ve never seen so many fresh-caught fish.”

“It’s worth experiencing once, isn’t it?” my father said. “I should’ve caught more, but I had to help Max.”

My mother looked at me then. “Where’s yours, Max?”

“There,” I said and pointed to my mangled fish in the bucket. It was dark and she couldn’t see what I was pointing at.

My mother nodded in a nice way, and I think she liked everything then and wanted the day to turn out right and for all of us to be happy.

“The one I caught got hurt. The hook got stuck and we had to pull its insides out,” I said.

My mother bent closer to the pail to take a look. “Which one is it?”

My father looked at me then with a strange smile, a smile that said he wished I had never mentioned anything about the fish. And I wished I hadn’t either. I looked up in the sky at the thousands of glittering stars and I wished we could just leave and go home.

“That one’s my mistake there,” my father said and grinned. I shouldn’t have pulled the hook out so fast, Jackie. I was excited.”

My mother looked out at the lake for a minute, and then looked at my father and back again. “Poor fish.” She shook her head. “I think you should throw it back. It has bad energy now, we shouldn’t eat it. Maybe it will live.”

“I can’t throw it back now,” my father said.

My mother looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“It’s almost dead anyway,” my father said.

“You can throw it back,” my mother said. “You tore its insides. Isn’t there a rule or something?”

“No,” my father said.

And my mother looked from my father to me. “You throw it back, Max,” she said in a sweet way, and my mother looked young then, like a young girl, in her jeans and cotton white blouse, her hair blowing into her eyes.

“No.” My father put down his rod and shook his head. And I didn’t know why he wouldn’t just throw it back, because it would’ve been easy.

My mother looked at the fish, which was still thrashing, its head up, gasping. “Please, Mike, for me? He belongs in the water.”

“You don’t understand, Jackie,” he said. “It happens. It isn’t important.”

“But that’s so cruel, Mike,” she said, and a sweet smile came on her lips.

“Well I’m not going to touch it,” my mother said. “Max, take the fish and throw it back.” I started to go, but my father suddenly grabbed me by my shoulder and pulled me back hard, so hard his fingers made bruises in my skin that I saw later.

“Nobody’s throwing the fish back.” he said. “This is over with now.”

And my mother gave my father a cold look then. “You don’t have a heart, Mike,” she said. There’s nothing to love in you anymore. You’re just a selfish son of a bitch, that’s all.”

And my father nodded at my mother, then, as if he understood something he had not understood before, but something that he was willing to know. “Fine,” he said, “that’s fine.” And he took the fish from the pail with his hands and threw it hard against a boulder between the docks. It exploded on contact, its insides red and messy in the starlight and bits of fish tumbled into the water. “Now who has a heart?” my father said. But my mother was not there when he turned around. She had already started back to the motel and was almost lost from sight in the darkness. And my father smiled at me then and his face had a wild look on it. “Okay, Max?” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

“There’re limits to everything, right?”

“I guess so,” I said.

“Your mother’s a special woman, but she’s not the only special woman in the world.” And I did not say anything. And my father suddenly said, “Here,” and held out the pail with the rest of the fish in it. “Don’t you want this? Don’t you want to eat these? Nobody thinks they’ll die. But I could die right now and not care at all.” And I did not

know what to do then. Though it is true that I wanted to hit him, hit him as hard as he had thrown the fish, and see him on the ground bleeding and crying and pleading for me to stop. Only at that moment he looked scared to me. And I had never seen my father scared before and I felt sorry for him, as though he was already gone. And I did not end up hitting him at all.