

Fishing

He is an old man. He stands on an outcropping above an expanse of darkening water, and casts an impossibly delicate ribbon of four-pound test monofilament toward the distant horizon. And he dreams.

He is nine years old again, frightened, shivering, dizzy above the deeply cupped hands of the cove. Blaine, Andy, Jimmy, and Joey form a wall at his small back. "Go on, dink. Jump!"

"Leave him be. He'll jump when he's ready. Won't you Mike?" Joey's voice wavers. "It's okay, Mikey," he whispers. "I won't let you get hurt. Just take a step. It's just like flying."

Fingers brush against the youngest boy's small back, just a touch. He feels himself tip forward, his balance broken, and he is falling. Almost before he knows he is dropping, he hits the frigid water, breaks the surface, and descends into the clear depths. His head throbs from the shocking cold, and his arms and legs freeze, rigid, immobile pale sticks. His eyes open and peer upward through the crystal distance—light in blue liquid spiraling toward sun and faces through the long distorted lens.

Michael Samuel Allen, PhD, Emeritus Professor at State College, father of Joseph Michael, Carolyn Joy, and Gwendolyn Anne, owner of a well-kept apartment building on North Kent and a three-story walk-up with a half-acre of old maple and oak growth just off University Drive, and widower of the former Marilyn Catherine Hughes of Royal Oak, Michigan, stands on an edge of stone, a rugged formation jutting up from the Canadian Shield and overlooking the cove of his childhood, the cove of his dreams.

The November wind blows steady from the Northwest. It is strangely warm on his face yet is sprinkled with tiny crystals of first snow, bright sparks of ice, precursors to the great smothering storms that will come from the lake soon enough. He watches below. The night-dark water runs up to the shore behind thin white ribbons, one following the other quickly, as if there is no time to waste. The cove is deep, clear and cold, and he thinks this may be the most important place on earth.

He and other twelve-year old boys balance on a precipice, staring down into toilet-blue water, goading one another, "Jump, chickenshit!" Finally, spurred on by a mixture of humiliation and courage, one willow-thin boy leaps out over the clear, open air and drops into the icy water below. The others follow, and the warm summer day is lost in cannonballs and belly flops into the deep cove where their skin turns white-blue and quavers beneath the surface. That December, there are rumors that a body was found washed up on the smooth stones of the beach, an old man who they say had jumped from the very ledge that launches them into space before plunging them again into the cold, deep reality of the lake. For weeks they talk about it in grave excited tones, but by the summer, the story passes into myth, and the cove is theirs again.

The old man smiles and shivers, closing his eyes and rocking gently as a wave of melancholy passes through him. The rod tip bumps, and his hand tenses. The line grows momentarily taut and he snaps the tip upward and sets the hook in something deep and far away. He does not want to catch a fish tonight. But he is committed. If the line breaks, the fish, most likely a big laker, may be left mortally wounded, the hooks imbedded deep inside. He'd heard all his life that a fish's metabolism will eventually

dissolve fishhooks and lures, but he'd never believed it. He'd seen too many trout belly up.

He is eighteen years old. Buoyed by youth and the sense of patriotism and duty characteristic of this place and the times, he enlists in the Navy during what is called the Vietnam conflict. Two brothers have already served and have come home mostly intact. The third, Joey, is in the Marine Corps. He enlists in the Navy because he so loves the water, but the oceans are a disappointment, tepid, broad and unfamiliar, and smelling of salt and decay.

The reel buzzes as the big fish runs for deeper water. He winds, keeping the tension even and soft, drawing the fish in close. This happens again and again until the line tells his hands that the fish has tired. There will be one more half-hearted run, but the trout has given up. Slowly, delicately he reels in the loops of impossible thread easing the big fish to him.

He is nineteen years old. He spends his days numbed by the dull routine and the endless slow rolling of the behemoth beneath his feet. He is two hundred miles off the coast of Vietnam when he learns that Joey will not come home intact. He is flown stateside for the funeral, a solemn Marine Corps send-off for a brother in arms. It seems to offer solace to his mother and father. It offers none to him.

After the Navy, he returns to the cove often, sometimes casting a thread of liquid sunlight into the late autumn winds, feeling the stinging cold against his face and hands, watching the line loop out over the water and slide in and down through the deep. He imagines following it as if he were once again a boy diving deep into the frigid cove, going on and on, across the great lake and on to the sea, to all the seas. He whispers, “. . .

fish fill the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.” And he lets himself wonder if the delicate crystal of fiber might reach up into the heavens, might connect him to whatever exists beyond this place.

Later, he and Marilyn come to picnic and walk barefoot on the smooth rocks along the shore. She likes the warm gentle summers on the lake. He keeps November to himself.

For years after they've moved to Phoenix, then Minneapolis, whenever they come back, they make a pilgrimage to the cove. Even now he can see Carolyn testing the water with nervous toes while Joe and Gwen pick through the water-worn stones searching for the black and white pebbles they called zebra rocks. When a job opens at the college, and they decide to return, the kids have already grown and made lives in other places. Still, the years are good.

Now he can't make out the rocks that carpet the beach where the cupped hands of the cliffs open to the leafless woods above. It is too dark. He shivers again. The sweet melancholic warmth has evaporated, and he is simply cold. He wonders if the story about the old man who jumped is true. Then he laughs aloud. He's an old man now. The dark water splashes cold against the outcropping and the wind picks up, the snow stinging his face. He smiles and shakes his head, then turns and makes his way stiffly over the rocks and down the dim trail to the pebbled beach, the line still softly taut. In the spring, Carolyn and Gwen will visit with the grand-kids, and Joe says he might make it home this the summer.

He shivers and draws the fish to him, almost to the dry shore where he stands. Its back, under a membrane of water, reflects its own light. It lies on the pebbles, a trophy

for a fisherman, and its black eyes are quiet and serene. He bends to dislodge the lure, hoping to release the creature unharmed, and it simply falls away as if, all along, he and the fish had been bound by nothing more than light. He reaches out to touch the creature, and the great back turns and slides gently under his pale, cold fingers and back into the deep.

It hurts to stand up. He turns toward the land. Tomorrow he'll return, and for as many tomorrows as he has, he'll cast a long, impossible line into the deep, clear icy waters of the cove and beyond.

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