

“Goat Island”

Cindy drove as Jesse sat in the bow of the boat. Pine trees cast long shadows from the shores of the lake. The boat was his father's. One of the few things his mother didn't sell or pawn. It sat on its trailer in the back lot of the trailer park. When the old man moved back in, he got it working in two days.

It had taken ten minutes to teach Cindy how to drive the boat. Much shorter than when his father tried to teach him. The lesson had gone on until nearly midnight before the boat ran out of gas and they paddled back to the dock.

The old man had traded a deep freezer full of venison for the boat. The engine and everything else had been cobbled together from day long trips to salvage yards across the county. The thing still worked after all this time.

He told Cindy about Goat Island, about the goats his father said roamed in the woods. The goats that ate whatever they could find. He had to yell over the whine of the propellers and couldn't tell if she heard him or the nodding was just the waves making her face wobble.

Jesse cast a line off the side of the boat. His worm flung end over end and sunk. The slow chop-chop-chop of the propeller left a long wake behind them. Goat Island sat as a hub of trees in the distance.

“Who do you think lives in those houses?” She asked.

The homes were tall off the water, supported by beams running out of the lake. They were little niches carved out of pine trees on the shore. Speed boats were tied up to piers, jet-skis beside them. The swell made them rock as Jesse and Cindy passed.

“You ever think we could live in a place like that?” She asked.

“No.”

“I wonder what it would be like,” She said. “People driving by all day, staring in, wondering who lives in a place like that. How many people you think tie up to their docks and wander in?”

Cindy watched him reel in, re-bait the hook, grime from the worm can left on his fingers. Jesse yanked the bobber off the line and cast, setting the line so it rested far back behind the motor, the thin filament between his fingers. She slowed again, the line going slack. The tree branches quick out of the water, empty and grasping.

“Watch out for the trees,” he said.

“Why are there trees?” She asked.

Jesse told her his father’s story about the town that used to be there before they flooded the lake. He told her how his father thought the trees were ghosts of that town, how they were there to catch boaters, suck them down.

The bow of the boat rasped against a tree branch. The motor quickly ground out, sputtered and died. Cindy yanked hard at the cord, recoiled back. Again she did it. The motor caught once and then nothing. He handed her the rod, nudged her over on the seat.

“Like this,” Jesse said. He yanked the cord and gunned the engine. The motor spurted black smoke. The fishing line slack and in their hair.

“I didn't see,” she said as he backed up. The branch screeched as it came out from under the boat. He shut the motor off, placed her hands under his.

“Just be gentle,” he said as they got it started. “It’s not about the strength, but the timing.”

Her hair blew back on his face as the two of them guided the boat through the trees.

“Easy does it,” he said, taking the rod and reeling in the line. The worm was nearly unraveled from the hook. Her hand covered her eyes to block out the setting sun.

The worm wiggled off his fingers and flopped into the water. Jesse set the reel back down in the bottom of the boat. Goat Island rose before them out of the broad plain of the lake.

Cindy cut off the engine.

The boat crested the beach beside another. Cars lined the bridge across the water. The splash as Cindy jumped into the shallows and pulled the boat onto shore, tied it off to the stump. She carried the tent and sleeping bag from the boat into the woods.

He put the bobber on and cast from the shore. It plopped in the water as the wakes from passing boats pushed it back towards him. The line twitched.

Jesse jerked the rod. The hook and the red and the white of the bobber flew back over his head and caught in the tree behind him.

The hook jabbed into his thumb as he yanked it through the tree branches.

“You got yourself a right mess there.” A man walked out from the trail that lead into the woods, a dog pulling at a rope linked to the collar.

“I thought I had him,” Jesse said. “Jerked the line back.”

“Done that myself,” The man said. “You gotta let that hook set first. Then jerk on it, get it set deep. Catfish got a hard jaw. You ain't gonna hurt 'em.” Thick fingers took the hook and fingered the worm.

“Looks like it just started to nibble on that one,” The man said. “Throw it back out there, now that it's got a taste.” The hand wove the line through the branches, took the worm and re-laced it on the hook.

“Probably won't catch nothing though,” The man said. “So much junk in this lake, catfish ain't gonna be interested in a little worm.”

The sun set a bright orange through the trees. The dog bolted after the line as he recast it, splashed through the murky brown water.

“That your boat?” The man asked. “Beer in that cooler?”

“You want one?”

“Name’s Bobby.” Bobby’s hand dug into the ice, shook out a beer, drank down half of it.

“Cold,” Bobby said.

“Where’s the dog going?” Jesse asked.

“Don’t know. He’ll come back though.” The dog paddled, reaching the bobber and veering off around the curve of the island.

“That rope not going to catch on something?” Jesse asked.

“If it does, he’ll start up barking. I’ll find him.”

Bobby finished the can and threw it back into the trees. His fishing pole was all bamboo, the hook large and rusty. The yellow bobber sat on the water when Bobby cast it out and rode the wakes from the passing boats.

They fished in silence.

“Tent’s up,” Cindy said as she walked out of the woods. She sat at the edge of the lake, the water covering her thighs. The light of Bobby’s cigarette barely glowed further down the beach. His yellow bobber splat back and forth in the lake.

“Who’s that?” Cindy asked.

“Bobby,” Jesse said. “His dog is around here somewhere. Watch the line.”

Jesse wedged the butt of the rod in the sand and climbed back in the boat.

The boat rocked beneath him as he flung the firewood out. He dug the pit in the dry dirt, stacked the wood, lit it and blew on the pine needles and leaves to get them to catch.

“A fire gotta have a good base,” he said. “You don’t have a good base, you’re gonna get a quick burnout and that’s it.” The whoosh as the blaze started.

“The fire gonna have to die down before we start cooking though,” he said to Cindy. Cindy reeled in the line, the worm gone.

“Something’s out there,” she said. “Something’s eating it.”

The coffee can in her hands as she reached for the night crawler, hooked it once through.

“You gotta do better than that,” Jesse said, wrapping his arms around her body, guiding her fingers, showing her how to lace the worm through the hook once-twice-three times.

“Little bit of blood’s okay,” he said. “Gives the fish a taste.”

“Is the fish going to be worth eating if we catch one?”

“Every time we came out here with my daddy as a boy, we always ate what we caught.”

Together, they leaned back with the line, pressed the button on the reel and let the line fly. The splash as the red-white bobber fell far past the boat.

They reeled in, the worm gone again. Jesse put the rod back in the boat.

“We’ll try again later,” he said.

The glow of the fire bounced out onto the lake as Cindy threw a branch in.

“Once we catch something, we’ll need to keep the fire nice and low so the fish doesn’t burn,” Jesse said. “Catfish will cook up quick.”

“I ain’t gonna catch nothing with this piece of plastic,” Bobby said at the edge of the campfire. Cindy shook his hand, her pale skin dwarfed by his dark fingers. She moved around the blaze so that the water spanned open before them. There were dim lights as boats crossed each other and a faint pulse as the sun went down.

The horns blared from the bridge. Sparklers sizzled.

“Gonna start any moment now,” Bobby said.

“You been out here before?” Cindy asked him.

“Every 4<sup>th</sup>. Me, the tent, the dog.”

“There really goats out here?” Cindy asked. Bobby shrugged.

Jesse told Cindy what his father once told him. The goats lived out here, a pair let loose 30 years ago. They multiplied, eating the pine needles and dense undergrowth between the trees. He didn't tell her about the rest of the story. The half-man, half-goat his father said herded the goats, that ate little boys.

Cindy stood, brushed the dirt off her jeans. She walked back to the boat, a vague shadow by the water's edge. The cooler creaked as Cindy opened it. She handed Bobby a beer, wedging hers in the sand. Jesse shook his empty.

“You get one for me?” Jesse asked.

“You said you would have one, two at the most.” Cindy said.

“Let the man drink if he wants,” Bobby said. “What's gonna happen out here? He gonna beat the shit out of a tree?”

“It's up to you,” she said. “But remember.”

“I know,” Jesse said. “Don't tell my shit to the world.”

Jesse pulled the boat once more further up onto the beach, tightening the knot that tied it to the stump. Jesse just barely heard Cindy say the words, “His father,” and saw Bobby's nod. He played the flash light over the lake, the glint of bottles, the pale plastic of floaters from trout lines.

His father had left his mother and him alone in the world for six years. And then just walked back in like he owned the place. And his mother and the old man made a go of it for six months before she was gone.

He didn't see it, he knew know. All those years that his mother waited up for his father. The hickeys on his father's neck like dark glistening bruises.

She left one night and they found her car two weeks later. The turns signals both flashing as the headlights pointed up at the dark sky. They spent the night with a search team in the surrounding woods. His father went to the plant and came home and locked himself in the room that he once shared with Jesse's mother. She had been gone for a year.

The flick of a tail splashed water against the boat as Jesse bent down to the cooler. The spines as it turned. The long languor of the whiskers stood out in the shallows.

Catfish. Deep cut on its side as it rolled. Guts yellow, the organs dark, gone as it rolled again.

Cindy's and Bobby's faces glowed with a greasy sheen back at the fire. Cindy leaned over, watched Bobby tie a knot in the line he held in his fingers. The slow workings of her hands as she tried it herself. Jesse crumpled the empty can, hit the catfish as it spun.

His shins scrapped against the back of the boat as he climbed down, his feet sinking in the spongy mud. The oar was coated in a thick layer of electrical tape where his father split it once.

The fireworks in a quick burst and fizzle of red. The second one hissed as it spilled into the lake. The catfish was bright in oranges and blues. His oar broke the water close to it, the flick of the tail as it disappeared.

Standing waist deep in the water, Jesse prodded with the oar, his toes sludging through the mud. Bobby and Cindy's faces flashed red-green as they looked up from the campfire.

Jesse hit the catfish as it rolled again, edge of his oar sinking into the open wound. It broke off in his hand, floated as the catfish went under.

He sloshed after it, grabbed it by the tail and pulled. He dragged the fish through the sand of the shallows, the fireworks quick now, the night bright. The pop-pop-pop of fireworks as the fish splashed. The thunk of the broken oar against it once more.

Cindy stood when she saw him, her eyes on him and the fireworks behind him.

"Look," she said, running and grabbing his hand as he dropped the fish. "It's the end."

The fish washed ashore. Bobby tossed tree branches into the fire. Cindy squeezed his hand in time with the fireworks.

"I just had the one," he said. "Finally caught something too."

The howl of Bobby's dog from somewhere in the dark pines of the island as the fireworks ended.

"With the rod?" Cindy asked.

"With the oar. Hit it a couple of times. Catfish. A big one," Jesse said, putting his fingers inside the mouth, pulling it up. The small teeth and tongue rasped against his hand.

"You got something there?" Bobby asked.

Cindy took her hand out of his, the white flash of her thighs as she bent down to the cooler in the boat.

The lights on the bridge across the lake came on all at once, the horns blaring. He held his hand above his eyes as he looked at her.

"I hit it. With the oar." Jesse pointed to the piece of broken wood rolled up on the beach.



“Why?” She asked. The foam from the beer lingered on her lips.

“We weren't catching anything with the lines.”

Bobby stood at the edge of the water, watching as it crept towards his boots.

“What's wrong with it?” Jesse asked.

“Nothing,” Cindy said. “It's a big catfish.

“Looks like something been at it,” Bobby said. “Like it got caught on something. Boat motor, probably.”

The splash as someone jumped from the pier in the distance and waved a single green sparkler.

“Look down at that,” Bobby said. “All rotted out from the inside. You probably didn't have to hit it much.”

“Broke the oar on it,” Jesse said, carrying the catfish to the fire. He looked at the teeth, ran his hands down the cold wet whiskers. The dead stink of its mouth, the dark black that coated the tongue.

“You probably ain't using the right bait,” Bobby said. “Why you ain't catching nothing on the reels. See that in the mouth? That's mud. Catfish eat dead shit mostly. They don't go for worms and things.”

“Your dad gonna give a shit that you broke the oar?” Cindy asked.

“Why would he give a shit?” Jesse asked.

“Cause all this shit is his.”

“He doesn't come out of his room,” Jesse said.

The quick sizzle of water on the skin as Jesse held the catfish up to the fire. Flesh fell back from the cut, a pale gray with burgeoning yellow underneath.

“That's the roe,” Bobby said. “You can eat that shit.” Bobby wrapped his fingers around the fish, squeezing till the yellow goo fell out, plopped into the campfire.

“Let go,” Jesse yanked the fish away, more roe falling out, caking his shoes.

The fish flopped once as Cindy bent down to look at the cut in its side.

“Watch out,” Jesse said. “Get away.” Jesse gave her a push, her pale hands catching her fall in the sand.

“The spines, they can be poisonous,” Jesse said. Bobby's hands pulled Cindy up.

“Don't ever do that,” Cindy said.

“He's right, though,” Bobby said.

“I don't care,” Cindy said. Her flashlight bobbed as she walked down the path into the woods. The light at the pier went out. Jesse took a sip out of the bottle that Bobby held out.

Jesse dug the knife into the thick flesh under the neck, sawed it through skin, made the single incision down the belly. Guts quickly caught in the flames as he slung them out of the fish. The roe like wet dough in his fingers.

Bobby pulled at the bottle. His eyes glinted just beyond the light of the fire. The quick red as Bobby sucked down a cigarette. Jesse cut out the dark meat from where the boat motor sliced through. The catfish slipped out of his hand into the fire, the blaze out for a moment and then sparking high around it. His hand reached into the flames. Bobby's fingers yanked his wrist.

“You want to get burnt?” The smoke from the fire and the cigarettes in Jesse's face, the fish curled in flames.

“Sit down,” Bobby said, pushing him back into the chair. The cloth of the camping chair tilted back, dumped Jesse in the wet sand.

Bobby poked in the fire with a stick, stabbing the fish and pulling it out.

“What you gonna do with it?” Jesse asked.

The crash of the fish through the leaves as Bobby tossed it in the woods, the sharp plop as it landed in pine needles.

“Leave it,” Bobby said. “Nasty thing.”

The fire died down as Jesse stared at Bobby across the glow of the coals. Cindy called his name once from the tent, asked if he was coming.

Jesse watched through darkness and smoke. The fire hissed as Bobby poured their half-empty beers out into the ashes. The cans clinked as they fell against each other. Bobby rocked his boat to get it out of the sand and pushed it out. The oars cut the water. Bobby was white in the moonlight. His dog barked from the bow of the boat.

His father’s boat slipped out of the sand and floated on the wakes. The creaking rope was still tied to the stump. Jesse walked out in the water and pulled it back to shore.

With a torch from the fire, he searched the woods for the fish. The skin was coated in pine needles, the crackle from where it burned. He took it to the lake, ran it through the cold water and brushed the needles off. Cindy came out of the woods and sat in his empty chair. Her red eyes as she turned the fire with a stick, the blaze coming back in sparks, then in flickers.

“Get it hot,” Jesse said. He sliced again through the thick skin, cut away the bad meat, the places where the dirt and pine needles touched. He pulled back the skin, found a piece pure white and untainted and carved it out. The rest of the fish he let fall in the water.

“Put some oil in the pan,” he said.

Cindy in his lap as he eased the fish into the pan, the two of them prodding and turning it.

“Fresh catfish is the best eating, my old man always said,” Jesse said.

“I hope so,” she said as she took the first bite.

The paper plates in the fire, he told her the story of the goat man. The half-man half-goat who stalked the island. He would push your boat out when you were sleeping, he said to her, and just sit back in the woods, see how long you could make it on your own. To see how long before you tried that long swim across the lake.