Top of Form

Bottom of Form

**Deep Eddy**

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It was an eight-hour drive from my condo in Cincinnati to my father’s house in Alabama, where I was born. At a little past midnight I turned off the gravel road and parked in the uncut grass by my father’s shed, my headlights illuminating the bleached cedar fence. Behind that fence were a hammock and a small statue of a cat and my mother’s tombstone. Her ashes were in the house. My father had left the porch light on, but I knew he would be asleep. Though I’d spent the first sixteen years of my life in Blacks Crossroads — and still visited at least once a month — I was always a little stunned by the quiet at night.

Inside I headed straight for the kitchen and poured some bourbon with a single ice cube.

Now then.

Our bass-fishing gear was scattered all over the dining room: rods and reels leaning against the wall; boxes and bags of soft plastics on the grimy linoleum floor; different shapes and sizes of pliers and scissors and scents and dyes for making lures scattered on the oak table where no one ever ate anymore.

I still had to tie on my lures, which I liked doing even more than the fishing itself. We had a tournament the next morning — a thousand bucks to the winners. As always I thought we had a chance, even though we’d never come close. I tied on some shallow-running crankbaits, then unfolded the topographical lake chart. High on anticipation, I worked on our strategy. Without more bourbon I wouldn’t be able to sleep.

It seems ridiculous to make that sixteen-hour round trip once a month, and sometimes twice, just to go fishing. But competitive bass fishing was more than a hobby my father and I shared. It was a kind of prolonged mythical struggle. If only we could win a bass tournament, then I would finally kill off the demon of his relentless negativity.

He has never won a thing in his life. He claims — only half jokingly — that he’s cursed. When I was four or five, I asked him why he and my grandfather hardly ever killed any deer, while the other members of the Indian Creek Hunting Club killed several each season. “We got some kind of curse,” he said. “Or maybe there’s a smell about us.”

Several years later he shot one of the largest bucks anyone in the club had ever seen. It was the talk of the county. He placed the mounted head on the living-room wall. Then our trailer caught fire, and the trophy was destroyed, the hair burned away and the polyurethane foam inside half melted. I’ll never forget those glass eyeballs staring out from the bald, mangled face. Cursed. Sometimes I was tempted to believe him.

My mother died in a car crash fifteen years into their marriage, when I was fourteen. Or maybe I should say she disappeared, since her car and body remained undiscovered in Lake Wedowee for two years. But my father was a deeply negative man even before her death. It’s almost as though something inside him had sensed this looming tragedy and decided to preempt it with pessimism.

He and I didn’t have much of a relationship when I was little. Sometimes he’d get down on the floor with me and play with my He-Man action figures, but usually he was too tired from his job at the rubber plant to do much more than smoke cigarettes and stare at the TV. After my mother died, though, we became allies in a war against despair. He did everything he could to make sure I got the hell out of Blacks Crossroads, and I’ve done everything I can since to give him something to look forward to — like winning a bass trophy.

Before dawn the morning of the tournament, my father and I sat bundled up against the cold, drifting in his Ranger Reata, surrounded by about fifty other boats, all barely visible except for their navigation lights — red and green in front, white in back. They looked like floating candles.

We were shivering and waiting for “safe daylight.” As the sky brightened, I looked around at the other boats. Most didn’t have mud lines on the side, like my father’s. They didn’t have bare spots in the carpet or mildew on the seats. Whatever. Fish don’t care what kind of boat you have. I asked my father if he wanted the last sausage biscuit, but he shook his head. He never ate breakfast. With his hood cinched, I could barely see the white in his beard. Finally the man on the loudspeaker led us in a prayer about personal safety and how lucky we were to have a place like Lake Wedowee where we could be men and enjoy God’s handiwork. I stood and half bowed my head just so no one would give me any looks. Then the man played the anthem by holding a boom box up to the microphone. I leaned over and whispered, “Should I take a knee?”

“You’ll get us shot,” my father said.

The man on the loudspeaker started calling boat numbers.

“We can win this one,” I said, putting on my life jacket.

“All rightie, then.”

My father had picked up this expression from the movie *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, which I’d watched every night for several weeks after my mother had disappeared. He used it to mean all kinds of things.

That morning what he meant was: *Don’t make me get my hopes up*.

My father let me drive the boat, since he couldn’t see so well anymore. When the announcer called number 32, I idled past the buoys, signaled to the tournament director, pulled my face shield down, then throttled it, heading south to where the sky was purple and the wisps of fog were just breaking apart over the blue-silver water.

When I was little, there were stacks of *Bassmaster* magazines in our trailer. In the shed I’d found my father’s tackle box with its collection of brightly colored lures: weird amalgams of insects and amphibians with angry red eyes. His broken-down Bass Tracker boat, with its hand throttle and sonar screen, was retired to the barn. I’d sit behind the wheel and pretend it was the *Millennium Falcon*. Eventually he sold the boat for parts and hauled the rest of his fishing “junk” to the dump.

Years later, when I asked why he’d quit bass fishing, he said it was all just a big racket, a conspiracy between pro fishermen and tackle companies: buy the right rod, the right lures, and the right boat, they promised, and you’ll catch the fish of your dreams. Once he realized he couldn’t afford to keep up, he quit. “It’s all just luck anyway,” he said, “and I ain’t got none but bad.”

The thing about my father is, when he quits something, he doesn’t just quit — he swears an oath. Other oaths have included never cutting his hair, drinking a Coke (he drinks only Pepsi), or entering a Walmart. The oath against bass fishing is the only one I’m aware of that he’s broken. And I’m the reason he broke it.

Iwas sixteen, home from boarding school for the weekend, riding around with an older friend named Smoke, drinking Jim Beam and smoking weed and listening to the Grateful Dead. This was about a year after my mother’s car had been found beneath Foster’s Bridge. Smoke parked by an old single-lane wood bridge. He got out, opened his trunk, and removed two fishing rods, handing one to me. I stood looking at it. “What are we doing?”

“This is a good place to catch bass.”

I did not want to catch bass. I wanted to ride around, get high, and listen to music. When I thought of fishing, I thought of mosquitoes and the mutilated minnows my father and grandfather used for catfish bait. I thought of waiting for fish that never bit. “They bit yesterday,” my grandfather would say, “and they’ll bite tomorrow, but never today.”

But this was the friend who’d introduced me to the Dead. So I tried opening my mind. A minute later we were standing on a sandbar next to a wide waterfall that poured over a moss-coated ledge. The swirling pool at the bottom of the falls was Deep Eddy, the limit of Lake Wedowee’s backwater. Smoke fished, a cigarette dangling from his lips, the smoke causing him to squint, which made his eyes resemble a smiling Buddha’s. In other words, he made fishing seem cool, like Hemingway did; like Brad Pitt did in *A River Runs Through It*, which my mother had made me watch with her when I was twelve. Just before the movie’s closing monologue, she’d sat up on the couch and said, “Make sure you pay attention to this part.” At the time I didn’t understand what the narrator meant by “timeless raindrops” or being “haunted by waters.” “Wow,” said my mother, reaching for her cigarettes. “Just — wow.”

Smoke gave me a plastic lizard embedded with gold glitter. It smelled of anise. I threaded it onto the hook and cast it toward the waterfall.

“Just let it drift,” he said.

“How will I know if a fish gets it?”

“You’ll know.”

After a few casts I felt the *tap-tap-tap*, like electricity traveling up the graphite rod.

“I think I got one.”

“Rear back on him.”

I did, and the fish erupted into the light, a burst of silver against the dark water. It tail-walked across the surface before disappearing. I reeled it in and lifted it by its lower lip, the way Smoke had told me to. Its belly had white scales, and its sides and back were green with black spots.

“What do you do with it?” I asked.

“Toss it back.”

“You don’t eat them?”

“Catch and release.”

I lowered the fish to the water, holding its plump belly. It flicked its tail and darted away.

The next day I tried to talk my father into going fishing with me at the waterfall. I wasn’t expecting him to say yes. He hadn’t done anything for fun since my mother had disappeared. The house was still filled with her knickknacks. Her cosmetics were still in the bathroom, her clothes still in their drawers. The background on his computer monitor was the same photo of her face that he’d used for the missing-person flyers. When I told him about the fish I’d caught, he sat up on the couch. With my hands I showed him the size of my catch.

“Creek bass,” he said dismissively. “We used to call them ‘cigar bass.’ ”

“They were bigger than any cigar.”

Six or seven Pepsi and Old Milwaukee cans stood on the end table beside him. He tapped the ash from his cigarette into one. Then he put on his shoes.

That afternoon I was standing beside him when he caught his first bass in over a decade. He held it up against the light and said, “All rightie, then.” Then he let it go, saying to it, “Go grow.”

Three hours after tournament launch, we still hadn’t caught a fish. This was not unusual. What *was* unusual was that we had actually headed into this event with a plan. My father rarely went fishing without me, even though he lived fifteen minutes from one of the best bass-fishing reservoirs in the country, but a week earlier I’d pressured him into scouting ahead. I’d told him I couldn’t keep driving down there every month if we didn’t even have a chance of winning. The next day he called me and said, “Believe it or not, I actually found some freaking fish.” They were big ones, too — females that had pulled up in the shallow against a stretch of clay shoreline, preparing to spawn.

But the day before the tournament it had rained hard enough to muddy the creek where he’d found them, and now they were gone. “They bit yesterday,” he said, “and they’ll bite tomorrow.” He set down his rod, lit a cigarette, and gazed out across the water. “We knew it wasn’t going to work.”

The *we* in that sentence bothered me. “We still got three, four hours,” I said.

“And it’s all downhill from here.”

It so happened I’d been listening to some audiobooks about mindfulness meditation. I didn’t actually meditate or anything; I just liked listening to people talk about meditating. But now I tried to center myself by focusing on the breath. That’s when an osprey that had been circling drew in its wings, dove to the water’s surface, and came up with a large fish in its talons, as if mocking me. “Fuck you!” I screamed at the bird.

My father laughed. I wanted to find the humor in it, too, but all I could think about was heading back to the marina empty-handed, only to watch the hundred or so other anglers bring to the scales bag after bag of fish, many bigger than any my father or I had ever caught.

I threw down my rod. “I just don’t get it.”

“We’re cursed.” He was crouching, a Pepsi can at his feet. The carpet was stained by all those he’d spilled over the years. “I told you a hundred times. You just don’t want to believe it.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Nature don’t like us. It’s in our freaking blood.”

“You’d rather blame some curse than admit we’re terrible fishermen,” I said.

“We ain’t bad. We’re as good as anybody else. It’s our luck that’s bad.”

“Luck’s part of it. Not all of it.”

“Most of it.”

“Some of it.”

My father and I had two different concepts of luck: He thought of it as something you’re born with, a kind of mark on your soul. I thought of it — or *tried* to think of it — as the element of chaos in nature, cause-and-effect chains too complex to predict.

The main reason I drove to Blacks Crossroads every month was to prove his concept wrong — for his sake, and my own.

It looked like I was going to fail again.

My father had started working at the rubber plant when he was seventeen, and he’d gone on working there for the next twenty years without so much as bothering to apply anywhere else — he was *that* certain no one would hire him. If the EPA hadn’t finally shut the place down, he’d probably still be working there, making lawn-mower tires.

Just a few months after the plant closed its doors, he got hired on at the new Honda plant in Lincoln, and he went out and bought a boat.

At the time I was in grad school at the University of Alabama, studying anthropology. He and I went fishing together about once a month at first. Then twice a month. Then every chance we got. When Zuzia, my wife, got a job in Cincinnati, I told my father he was going to have to find another fishing partner. I knew he wouldn’t go alone, and it tore me up to think he wouldn’t have those mornings on Lake Wedowee anymore. But a month later he shocked me with the news that a guy he knew from Honda had asked to be his tournament partner, and he’d agreed.

“You could take the five biggest fish we’ve ever caught,” I said, “and you *still* wouldn’t come close to winning a tournament.”

“Oh, well.”

“You won’t get all discouraged if you lose, will you?”

“Not planning on it.”

“Because you’re going to lose. And it won’t mean anything other than there are people who’ve been fishing longer and more often than you. This other guy any good?”

“He’s only got one reel. Guess what kind it is.”

“Not a Mitchell 300?”

“Yup.”

“Then why are you going with him?”

“Got nothing else to do.”

“Just please, *please* don’t get pissed off and swear some kind of stupid oath against fishing again.”

“All rightie, then.” I could hear him smiling.

They fished three tournaments together without breaking the top fifty before I told him to sign me up as his partner instead. At least I knew the difference between monofilament and fluorocarbon. I mean, *damn*.

We were heading south toward the hydroelectric dam — for a change of scenery, if nothing else — moving about sixty miles per hour, when we encountered a slower boat going in the same direction, and I tried to pass. We were in a sharp bend, and I trimmed the motor up for extra speed. At least, that’s what I thought I’d done. What I’d actually done was lift the jack plate, raising the motor so high that the propeller was barely in the water. As we rounded the bend, I noticed the steering wheel wouldn’t turn. Instead of stopping to figure out why, I forced it. The boat took a ninety-degree turn, skidding sideways, and a wall of white water struck me in the face.

The cliché is true: time really does slow down when you think you’re about to die. Tumbling in froth, I wondered what Zuzia was doing right then. I wondered who would call her to tell her I was dead. I thought of my dog. I thought of my father’s stupid curse. I still didn’t believe in it, but it made me sad that, if he didn’t die with me, he would spend the rest of his life believing in that curse with even greater fervor, totally convinced that the universe was a conscious entity that hated him, that wanted him to fail and wanted the people he loved to die. All because of something stupid I had done.

When people die in boating accidents, it’s usually because they didn’t attach the “kill switch,” a strap that connects the driver to the ignition and disengages the motor if the driver is thrown overboard. A driverless boat whose motor keeps running will enter a spiral pattern known as the “circle of death.” Eventually the boat runs over the person in the water, the propeller finishing them off.

I never wore my kill switch. It’s not like we were heading out into stormy seas or anything.

Once I’d stopped tumbling and realized I wasn’t dead, I figured the boat was almost certainly bearing down on me. I thrashed around, trying to see which direction it was coming from. But there wasn’t any boat. It must’ve flipped and sunk, I decided, my father trapped beneath it — just like my mother had been trapped in her car as the water took it under.

Finally I saw the boat. It was about a hundred yards off, my father at the trolling motor, heading my way. A few minutes later he pulled me aboard. I sat in the floor and caught my breath.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I think so.”

He gave me a couple of minutes to think about it, then said, “Right there’s the only reason the boat didn’t whip around and run you over.” He pointed to the ignition. The key was bent flat to the side, which had cut the motor. I must have smashed into the console. (Later I’d find the gash and a bruise on my hip.)

“Just one of those things,” he said.

“Where are my shoes?”

We found them under the steering wheel exactly where my feet had been. The force of the water had snatched me right out of them.

We drifted for half an hour while I lay on the front deck, trying to put the pieces of my mind back together.

“You feeling better yet?” my father asked.

“I’m cold.”

“Want to go home? Want to quit?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

I stripped off some of my wet clothes, but the sun was too weak to warm me. My father sat patiently at the steering wheel while I looked at the pines along the red-clay shoreline. I watched some clouds pass by. I stopped wishing for warmth and just let the cold penetrate me. The bite of it told me I was alive. I listened to it. My mother’s disappearance and death, my father’s lonesomeness, my own sense that the poverty and hurt of my childhood in Blacks Crossroads were keeping me from being the person I wanted to be — none of it was as meaningful as the fact that the trees were green, the water clear and deep.

I sat up. “Let’s go to Deep Eddy.”

“All rightie, then.”

What he meant was: *We’re lucky to be going anywhere at all*.

We’d never fished Deep Eddy during a tournament. All tournaments launched at Forty-Eight Marina, which meant that, to get to Deep Eddy, we would have had to pass Foster’s Bridge, where my mother’s car had been winched out of the water. My father hadn’t sworn an oath against driving within sight of that damn bridge or anything. He didn’t have to. Neither of us had ever so much as suggested it. Until now.

When we passed under the bridge, we had to slow our speed. The noise of the outboard dwindled. The boat’s frothy wake surged past until it crashed into the pilings. Beneath the bridge, swallows flitted around their mud nests. The vehicles roared overhead, causing me to flinch. Even the echoes had echoes.

“It isn’t so bad,” I said.

“Nope,” said my father, still at the wheel. I wasn’t feeling steady enough to drive. Or maybe I just wanted to luxuriate in the immense calm that had overtaken me ever since I hadn’t died.

He waited until we passed out of the bridge’s shadow and the sun just touched the tip of the bow before opening the throttle. I dipped my fingers into the spray of water beside me.

Ten minutes later the lake narrowed. I smelled the sourness of waterlogged stumps rotting in clay. My father dropped his speed again and maneuvered around the disturbances in the water that signaled submerged obstacles — the reason most fishermen wouldn’t come out this far.

“You should drive,” he said.

“Nah.”

“You know these rocks.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t hit one.”

“Get over here and drive,” he said. “You might never get over it if you don’t.”

I did as I was told. We weren’t in a lake anymore so much as a slow-moving river. As the current picked up, I enjoyed skillfully avoiding the snags. I wasn’t even thinking about catching any fish. Driving was challenge, and pleasure, enough.

We passed a deserted stone chimney, then an Indian mound buried in kudzu. Around the next bend we saw the falls.

We drew within casting distance of the waterfall, then dropped our Carolina-rigged lizards into the eddy and let the current carry us. I told my father I wanted to be in the back. I crouched and relaxed and gazed at the shore, like he was always doing. I smoked one of his Marlboros, even though I’d kicked the habit a couple of years earlier.

We made several casts without a bite, but I didn’t care. I was loving the smell of the algae, the sensation of the brass weight and glass bead clacking against the rocks. I pictured all the life down there, the different predator fish — bream and crappie and yellow cats and, hopefully, bass — feasting on the crawfish that scuttled in the flickering depths.

Then I saw my father almost fall out of the boat as a fish took the bait.

The fish surged downward. His rod bent and pulsed. Then the bass leapt, and it was huge. Down it went again. My father braced himself. I muttered meaningless encouragement: “Easy now. Take your time. You got him.” I had the net ready.

That’s when his line broke. He fell back onto the carpet, his chest heaving.

I dreaded what negative thing he would say next, likely something about that goddamned curse. I decided to preempt him: “There wasn’t anything you could’ve done different.”

But he sat up smiling. “That was the biggest bass I’ve ever had on the end of my line.”

“Yeah?”

“I got to *see* it.”

“I bet you there’s another down there with it.”

I took over the trolling motor while he tied on a new rig. When I reached the top of the eddy, I let the boat drift and turn for a moment. I didn’t want to cast until he was ready. Looking frantic and overjoyed, he wetted, knotted, and cinched his line, then threaded on the lizard. I stood there, staring at the light on the water’s surface, first wanting the anticipation to last as long as possible, then not wanting anything at all, just letting my mind go empty.

“OK, then,” he said. “Let’s see.”

We wouldn’t win the tournament that day — or ever. But we had fun catching those big, mean, fighting spotted bass upriver at Deep Eddy, where all the pros with their fancy bass boats were afraid to go because of the rocks.

A few years later my father bought a new boat and a new truck to haul it. Then he signed us up for an even bigger tournament league that visited reservoirs throughout Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia. I kept making those god-awful drives from Cincinnati until Zuzia got a job offer in London that was too good to turn down. By then we had two daughters, and the four of us packed up and moved into a Victorian terrace near the River Thames, which has little more than eels in it. Still, I walk by it with my dog several times a week and gaze out at the current breaks with a hungry, anxious feeling, wondering where the bass would hide if they did live here.

My father has gone fishing exactly once since I left more than two years ago. I guess once was enough for him to realize he couldn’t bring himself to do it alone. For a while I felt guilty, like I’d stolen something from him. But after about a year he started mentioning this woman who was hanging around, Judith. I’d be up drinking beer and watching Bassmaster videos on YouTube, and I’d give him a call and ask what he’d been up to, and he’d say, “Drove Judith down to Pascagoula to see her mom. All rightie, then.”

I didn’t know what she looked like, how they’d met, or anything else about her.

“What’s the weather like?”

“Too windy for fishing.”

I suspect he feels a little guilty, too, like he is letting me down by not going fishing. I want to tell him it’s fine. I’m just happy he’s not alone. But we’ll keep on talking around these things while day after day the boat sits idle in his yard, mold growing on the vinyl cover, wasps building nests in the exhaust pipe, weeds shooting up through the trailer wheels. And yet, as much as he still owes on the boat, he won’t sell it. It will just go on sitting there, like my mother’s knickknacks, her refrigerator magnets, her bread box with the words she painted on it — *Home Sweet Home* — until one day I’ll visit and spray the boat off with the pressure washer and haul it to Lake Wedowee and pray that when I turn the ignition, the engine rumbles to life.