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The Miraculous Catch of Fish

Howard Schaap

It was the only time we had gotten skunked, and as we rounded the bend before the last dike of Lake Shetek in the rumbly brown Scottsdale pickup, I was trying my best not to pout, which is to say I was at the point of going all blubbery fist-pounding tantrum.

“Sorry, pal. We’ve never got skunked before, have we? I usually get you to catch a fish, don’t I?” Dad asked.

I shook my head, but I felt the loss as great injustice, as fate opposing us and aligning against Dad, like what it meant to be predestined to hell, hell in this case being a hapless fisherman. Of course, I couldn’t really count the fish we hadn’t caught as a “loss,” but I knew my Bible. Jesus could say, “throw your nets out on the other side of the boat” and there would magically be tons of fish. Jesus could make the fish dive into nets or bite my hook, and he hadn’t. But Jesus couldn’t be to blame. That left either me or Dad, and since I’d spent all afternoon praying my ass off for even one nibble all the while breaking that same ass on the hard rocks of the second dike, it had to be Dad. Even though I would never have thought to blame Dad outright—it was, after all, clearly and purely grace that he broke from the first commandment, “Thou shalt work,” to take me fishing—his tragic-Calvinist martyr act was impossible to resist, and I could feel myself sliding from seven-year-old stoicism into outright pouting and agreeing with him: there was a lightning rod that prevented us from miraculous catches of fishes, and it was definitely Dad.

Dad had set out “never getting skunked” as a sort of promise the first time he’d taken me fishing. Sure, the quality of the promise had changed from one trip to the next. At first the ideal of “never getting skunked” meant that we would bring home

at least one game fish—crappie, perch, sunfish, northern, or walleye. Then the “bring home” part was dropped, and it meant that we would simply catch a game fish, no matter how small, including “game fish” the size of minnows biting our minnows. Then later still, the definition was widened even more to include the bullhead, that devilfish-plague of southwest Minnesota lakes, the mudfish with devil-horn stingers that you could always catch, and which therefore should never have been included in the definition of “skunked.” Then there was rock bottom, which we had hit on this trip.

“Not even a bullhead!” Dad said, the ultimate measure of fishing failure.

Skunked.

The promise that had been stretched all the way to bullhead was now broken, and therefore I felt myself justified in an all-out pout. The only thing that kept from embracing all out tears and tantrum was the prophet of woe.

Mom.

In hindsight, the never-get-skunked promise had really been a fishing covenant. “I promise we’ll catch something,” the terms of this covenant went, “and you promise not to be a little shit constantly whining to go home.” Dad had never voiced this second part of the covenant, but Mom had, loud and clear, since she had seen up close and personal what a little shit I could be.

Mom’s prophesy about me had gone like this: “He’ll never have the patience to fish. He’s too much like Gramps!”

And it was that prophecy now that held back the tears. To give in to tantrum would be to risk the grace of these father-son outings altogether, so I looked out the window to keep Dad from seeing, and thought of Mom’s jeering prophesy. “Impatient—just like his Grampa Hank.”

She’s standing at that huge white double sink

with drain board in a Leave it to Beaver kitchen. I'm looking up at her, unable to see the bloody meat she's working with, cracking it apart so it will thaw faster and she'll be able to have supper on the table at a reasonable hour.

"Be patient, Grampa Hank!" she hollers back at me. "You're just like old Gramps—you've gotta have it right now, dontcha!"

I stomp my foot. I do want a drink, I'm thirsty, damnit, but she's just turned this moment, the simple need of a child who's dying of thirst for a sip of water, into a double bind: choose death or align myself with my wicked hypocritical grandfather.

Grampa Hank is the name of the man whose dry, still house we go to Sunday after church, where the conversation is oppressed by long silences and Dad looks like he's being interrogated for crimes he didn't commit. From his chair my small bald grandfather with saliva at the corners of his mouth calls out to my grandmother for this and that. His balance is almost nil in old age, every step a high wire act, as my father's will be in old age, as mine probably will be.

"Mary! Get me a cookie!"

"Mary! Bring me that bulletin once!"

"Mary! Open the curtains!"

Not done quickly or to his satisfaction, he begins to raise himself against his immobility, cursing in Dutch under his breath.

This, Mom is saying, is me.

Even as I weigh this dilemma, my heart beating in my chest at the prospect, she's washed her hands and gotten the water. "Here—here's your water. Impatient, just like Old Gramps. That's what I'm going to call you—Gramps!"

If Mom was calling me the name of the SOB that made Dad's life so miserable, there was something wrong. This is part of mom's wager, that she can break my impatient nature on the rocks of the ambivalence toward my grandfather.

She pairs this wager with fishing. Dad hates Grampa and loves fishing; these are the two secrets to his character. At six years old, I feel the horns of the dilemma keenly: Give in to the screaming, foot-stomping, swear-under-my-breath part of myself; or go fishing with Dad.

Total depravity, meet grace.

And meet Snoopy.

One Christmas I get a Snoopy fishing pole. It's no accident that it's Snoopy, the beagle with

incredible emotional range, able to access the straight-up grief and joy that's so elusive for Charlie Brown the tragic. Snoopy is unreachable by the determinism of tragedy due to his beaglehood. The unrecognizable demands of the wah-wahing teachers of the adult world don't touch Snoopy, who is himself beyond language, meaning he's left to a world of pure imagination where ideas jump right to reality.

Snoopy stands in the gap for me. On summer afternoons when my little shit nature threatens to drive Mom crazy, I take my orange-and-white Snoopy fishing pole that comes complete with a plastic tear-drop plug expressly for the purpose and practice casting in the big open lawn south of the house. Among the quack grass and dandelions and five blades of blue grass, I imagine, Snoopy-like, reeling in fish after fish.

But the prophesy lingers. "He'll never have the patience for it—he's got too much Hank in him," Mom tells Dad in confidence, so that I can hear perfectly. It's as terrifying for me as for them. Just what in our nature is unbreakable, what can be undone?

So I steel myself against it. When we leave the yard for the first time in our always dirty Scottsdale pickup, my ten-year-old sister forgotten somewhere in the house, I can feel Mom's doubt echo like a mockery: "Good luck! We'll see how long he lasts!"

With the prophecy in the air behind me, and the promise of not getting skunked in front of me, I am the picture of patience that first outing with Dad. So much so that it becomes the down payment on a whole identity-carving series of father-son fishing trips.

So now, maybe a dozen trips into the covenant, all this was being tested.

"I always manage to catch you something, right? Even if it's a bullhead?" Dad persisted, as if to review the evidence against him, when it was really me that was on trial. This was like Dad, to—forgive the pun—pull a bait and switch and put himself at the center of the problem when that really wasn't the issue at all.

But something had changed in me; I was changed. I was ready for the trial. It wasn't just that I'd made my decision, that I'd chosen fishing and put my little shit nature behind me. Fishing itself had changed me, remolded that supposedly

unbreakable nature into something else. I had the prophecy and the promise and scriptural stories of fish and the Snoopy pole and the WPA and the rocks of Lake Shetek and bobbers to thank for the change.

Let me explain.

There are three dikes that connect the western shore of Lake Shetek with Valhalla and Keeley Islands, which almost bisect the lake and make a lovely spot for shore fishing. We had been fishing the south side of the second dike. This was our usual spot in the early days, perhaps because when the WPA had banked the rocks along the dikes in time immemorial, they had fitted the rocks on the south side of this dike together like bricks, flattest sides up, to create a flat fishing area so it was easier to walk compared to the north sides where the rocks were just dumped pell-mell. So, because I was little and clumsy, the south side is most often where we decamped in the early days because it was easiest to manage me, little shit that I was. Dad would set the bobber and my Snoopy pole and bait my hook with a minnow. And practiced up as I was, I would click the Snoopy pole's white button with my thumb and fling the bobber and hook and one silver-gray weight flipping into the water.

And watch.

It's hard for me to explain just how mesmerizing and endowed with spiritual power was the bobber—or "dobber" as Dad called it.

We've always used a type of fixed, pencil-bobber, thin on the top and bottom, swelled out in the middle, as if the pencil has swallowed a marshmallow. Out in the water, it's a brightly colored beacon: a thin red line right in the middle of the marshmallow swell which is where the waterline is, yellow from there up, except for a fire-red tip.

My job was to watch this thing. So on the south side of the second dike on Lake Shetek, in the dry, still afternoons, I watched this dobber and fought my little shit nature.

As it slid almost imperceptibly up and down the bank—

"Dad, it's moving. Do I have a bite?"

"There must be an undercurrent," he said.

Mysterious.

As it bob-bob-bobbed on the waves of a southeast wind—

"Dad, am I too close to shore?"

"Just give it a minute."

"How about now?"

"Okay, cast it out again."

As it sent out almost imperceptible blips—

"Dad, I've got a bite."

"That might just be your minnow," he'd offer after a time. "You've got a lively one on."

As I waited, hands braided to my Snoopy Pole, I was the paragon of patience. Or obsession-compulsion. I didn't throw rocks—that spooked the fish. I didn't wander up the bank—I might miss a bite. For hours and hours I stayed, baited by promises.

"Well, it's only four o'clock sun time," Dad would reflect. "In another couple hours the walleyes will start coming in to shore."

This was another prophecy or promise—all it took to root me to the hard rocks of the second dike where my one duty was to watch.

And pray. Dear God, how I prayed!

Almost from the start, I associated dobbers with prayer. Casting out the little pencil-man into the waves was like a simple request. "Please, if it be your will . . ." A good cast, a crisply-colored dobber, the right depth, a silver weight and well tied hook—all you can do is ask well, simply. Then it's out there and you can see it, a well-made prayer, elegant in its simplicity and all you can do is wait for an answer. There are undercurrents and wind, and these forces move against your dobber, but you just keep asking, again and again. It's a persistent prayer, your dobber is, unceasing. It's miraculous really, considering the forces displayed against it, that your dobber remains for the Almighty to consider. And for you to see.

Mostly, there are no bites. Mostly, you don't get an answer, you understand that; this is all part of it. If there were an answer every time, everyone would fish; patience would be nothing. This is not, after all, a clown God with a painted-on frown who hands out candy every time anyone asks.

I prayed madly for there to be a fish to bite my line. "Please, please, please let me catch a fish, please," was easily my earliest and most earnest prayer. Still is. Or, in light of Dad's promise about evening, I incanted, "Wall-eyes, wall-eyes come to shore, so my life won't be a bore!"

Think of the worldview of this. The depths were the unseen; God controlled both if there were fish and whether they would bite; faith was

the action of a cast—faith that there were fish in the unseen world and a request that God would lift the invisible barriers to let the fish bite on my line.

Dobbers taught me to pray; dobbers were prayer. If a dobber was a beacon, it was also an oracle. The slightest tic, the slimmest ripple meant contact from the deep, meant the presence of another being apart from my own. On the water, it was a little yellow and red flame, a tongue of fire from the Holy Ghost himself.

You watched and prayed through the long afternoon because mostly your visible dobber prayers didn't work and you felt a fool. These were times when others lost the faith, times of doubt and despair.

When your line wouldn't cast or got tangled and Dad had to undo the front of the Snoopy pole and the rats nest inside said you'd never cast again.

When what looked like a bite was a rock or a stick, and Dad had to break your line and start from scratch, cutting out ten whole minutes of dobber-prayer time.

When the dobber did send out ripples like mad that never took, and so you would reel it in to check but it was just your earnest little prayer minnow driving itself mad and getting all tangled in itself just to do anything else but the work of intercession on your behalf and Dad again had to untangle or cut it.

Or, worst, that feeling of foolishness, the idea that there are no fish and there is no God, that you've been fishing in an empty puddle and that the cars going by on the road are laughing at you for fishing the Dead Sea.

No, against this, you simply had to believe.

And endure.

Mainly you endure through the long afternoons because He wants this. He answers those who endure longer. So I determined to be the longest endurer. Through the longest answerless afternoons.

In this sweating meditation I built up the muscles of patience.

But there were answers, too, the first line of the covenant fulfilled by bites, by contact from the deep, by answers to well-made prayers. In fact, there were specific kinds of answers.

There was the down-periscope bite that's a steady downward march, like a submarine slowly torpedoing. The bob-and-weave bite, slight

bounces this way, then that. The staccato bite of sharper ups and downs. And the most unnerving of all, the dead-man's float, when a bobber comes up instead of down, a prayer sent back to you so you might reconsider—before it suddenly dove as if to the abyss itself, as if God has just been teasing you—God, the mad creator of the teeming fishes of the deep.

And half the time, more than half, you're too eager for an answer, so you don't get one. Your hook comes up empty, your prayer minnow taken as offering. This might be a kind of "no" answer, but it's a clear "no," and infinitely better than nothingness. You know something exists, in silence.

How much better were these prayers answered from the deep than from the unknowns of heaven, even when it was the "not yet" of a bare hook?

But there were yeses, too. We always caught something in those early, important days, like candy during confirmation class, key for the whole process to take.

The best were the crappies, who bit so unpredictably, they of the dead-man's-float bite.

"That's a crappie bite," Dad would prophesy, "get ready—tighten your line."

And just like that, down it would go.

"Okay now, set the hook!"

And you'd reel in a madly flapping crappie, silver-white like a medallion the size of a human hand, with little plastic mouth that was so fine, almost dainty. Dad would poke the stringer up through its gill, and there it was, your fish in the water that you could always check on—check on as proof that there was a God.

The patience-practice came especially to fruition one afternoon. The second dike had a bridge in the middle of it with creosote-drenched boards that would stain your hands brown, under which boats could go to get from the north to the south side of the lake. One of the first times we went, some kids on the other side were unable to hide the fact that they were having a good bit of success, both crappies and walleyes.

When another fisherman left the area, we moved in by the bridge across from these kids. I could feel Dad's excitement. We always fished for pan fish in those days; even though the walleye was the ideal, we didn't dare even dream of it. The fish were lying around the pilings of the bridge on this

day, we figured out. You had to cast your bobber out near these posts without hitting the top of the bridge, a four-foot or so space. It took a deft cast.

"Okay, cast right out toward that post, Pal. Do you want me to do it?"

But I had already clicked and flung. Like the quarterback with the tire swing, now we would see how dandelion casting had paid off. The tall man flitted through the air and landed three feet from the piling, drifted toward it with the slight current.

"Nice cast!" said Dad.

I don't remember the particulars of the bite except that it was a strong answer to prayer, a direct take; it must have been a fearsome fight on a little Snoopy pole, but I don't remember that or how we landed it, no doubt with panic, our first walleye without a net or other gear to land it. I do remember that it was long and thick as my bicep, that it had a big eye, and that I could feel Dad's excitement.

"That's a walleye," he revealed. "That's a nice one. Wow—beginner's luck!"

I loved having beginner's luck. It felt as if I was chosen.

I can still feel the forces at work in that scene: the gray water under overcast skies represent the forces of chaos, the patience and persistence of prayer, the answer of grace in a torsional silver fish, the love of a father.

As we crossed back over the bridge on this day, that fish was years behind us; this day had been back to arid and empty. The sun was setting, all that sun-time promise unfulfilled, but it didn't matter. I had changed.

"Sorry, pal."

"It's not your fault, Dad."

The scene is cinematic in my memory. As you come out of the trees from the second to first dike, the transition is like a slow wipe, like rounding a mountain to reveal the infinite plain ahead, the trees opening up to the last dike, the last piece of hope before the eternal flat land of the prairie. As the screen of trees pulled aside on this night, it revealed crowds of fishermen, three separate clumps. Three culverts connect a small slough on the north with an arm of the lake on the south, and on each of these culverts a small crowd had gathered.

"What's going on here? They must be catchin' somethin'," Dad said. We drove slowly past the first

crowd, then the second, looking along the water's edge for stringers in the water, of which there were several, with long clutches of white bellied fish on each.

"Do you wanna try it here, Pal?"

A nod was all he needed; a vigorous nod was what he got.

The farthest culvert only had one or two fishermen by it. Dad parked at the end of the road and walked back up to the culvert to ask if we might fish there. He came back to get me, and he was excited.

"He'll let us fish by him—he's a real nice guy."

I can't see the face of the man, but he's got the gear, spin-casting reels, professional-looking tackle box, a dip net. The man recedes in my memory; he must have literally moved over. I know this because I got placed right on the culvert. The water boiled out slowly beneath me, eddying and roiling in a way that was magic in itself. They were biting on black Mister Twisters, of which we had exactly none, but the guy—really, a nice guy—gave us a couple.

They were like black licorice with yellow eyes. Squishy, vinyly to the feel, with the heavy solidity of the lead head tapering down to a fragile tail that flopped in the air and fluttered in the water. Genius. Gorgeous. Dad tied one on the Zebco 33 reel we had and gave it to me.

"Here, you just use this one. I want you to catch one. You can't use your pole for this. Go ahead, you can do it."

And I knew I could. I cast and reeled, pulling it through the water, watching its yellow eye, spinning tail the last few feet as it climbed out of the push of the current.

On one of the casts, true to the man's promise, something grabbed it.

"Dad, I got one!"

Dad, incredulous: "Really?"

"Here, use my dip net," said the man as the fish fought me across the current, first one way then the other.

"Yeah, I gotta bring ours along," Dad said apologetically. "We forgot it this time."

Its side came up golden in the late evening water, its large eyes dark and blue.

"Yep, that's a walleye." Dad's voice trembled slightly. I can't see the second fish in my memory as it came in, but I know that one was even

bigger. Dad, feeling as if we'd intruded on the man's territory, that we'd probably already taken advantage of the grace allotted to us, and feeling that his prayer had already been answered more bountifully than he could have imagined, said we should go. When we left, the man and most of the crowd were still fishing.

The sun had set.

"How was that? How's that for getting skunked?! I told ya we'd catch something." He playfully slapped at me with the back of my hand. I couldn't stop smiling.

We stopped at the bait shop we always went to, Pete's Corner, where they weighed the fish on a special scale, then snapped a polaroid with us holding the fish, the weights written on a chalkboard behind us. I can't find the exact weights in my memory, but they were something official, like 1 lb. 8 oz. and 3 lbs. 2 oz.

Our picture hung on the board for a year or two, then I couldn't find it anymore.

I'm 25, married, moved back to the area where I teach at the high school from which I graduated. A friend and I drive down to Shetek to fish in the spring, park at the first dike after rains, as the water equilibrates through the culverts.

We situate ourselves on the middle culvert because it has the most space to fish of the three. We use jigs and expensive sensitive rods, dropping the line in the current and waiting for the slightest blip that says a fish has picked it up gently, then we pull the hook deep into their mouths. We have to work to get them. Cast after cast, snagging carp accidentally, catching an occasional bold bullhead with their obtuse mouths and undiscerning bites. My friend catches the first walleye, two pounds, then another, a pound-and-a-half. Then nothing.

I'm discouraged, doubting.

"I'm going to try the third culvert," I say. I have on a black lipstick jighead, one supposed to land like the angled tip of lipstick, keeping the tail up off the bottom to encourage the bite, with a body that's green and tan and spotted, with fluttering arms and legs. I call it the space alien, and Kevin, the friend, laughs at it.

The cattails are tight around the third culvert. The culvert itself is probably small. I can't tell

because it's completely submerged beneath. The only hint that there's a current here at all is that slight movement as the water boils out somewhere beneath the surface.

It's the second cast. As I flip my rod tip and pull the jig toward me, I feel a walleye suck it into its mouth like they do, holding it for a second as if it's a kid holding a vitamin, wondering whether they'll spit it out when our backs are turned or crunch its chalky grape flavor and say, "Mmm."

I set before it has a chance, and the rod barely gives.

It stays down, the fight is big, the runs strong enough that I may have hooked a carp. I just want to see it so I know. When I do, I see that's it a walleye, a thick green back, eye almost human size if round, sides a shimmery gold. I have no net. I have all adrenaline. I manage to tire it and drag it along a clump of cattails. While I hold my rod in one hand, I sort of heave it onto the shore with the other hand and one leg, where it rolls up on the line, flaps, and breaks it. With two hands I send it up higher onto the WPA rocks, which are smooth here, too. Then, I wrap it in both arms and squeeze against its flaps and run, like a fool, back toward the middle dike, clutching it tight to my chest.

We will take Dad back here. He'll come down from Brainerd, where he and Mom have moved, the fishing promised land of Minnesota where he never catches walleyes, and we will come on a cloudy, windy day, and at first they won't be biting. He'll have to pee so urgently, he'll simply lean over on the angled dike, hold himself with one hand and let fly, a position I will officially dub The Three-Point Stance. Time will reveal he has prostate cancer, more time and he'll have a heart attack and then the balance issues, which will keep him from even these rocks. But on this day it's Dad who will first try casting a Rapala, a black and shimmery gold Countdown, and who will first catch a goldeye, eighteen inches, a beautiful fish.

It will be an answer to prayer.

I will take it off the hook for him, and as I hold it carefully, tightly, in both hands, like the treasure it is, I will think that this is the miraculous catch of fish. That it's every fish I've ever caught.