

OPENER

A STURGEON FALLS HORROR SHORT



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MCDUGALS WORDWORKS



The walleye opener came the last Saturday in April, which meant I started fishing at midnight Friday. That was the rule and there was no getting around it. The season opened at twelve o'clock and a man who waited until Saturday morning to wet a line was a man telling you something about himself. My father fished it at midnight. His father did. By the time it came to me there was no decision in it. The last Saturday in April you were on the bank by twelve, cold or not, and most years it was not.

People down south don't understand the cold up here in April. They see the calendar say spring and they picture spring. They don't know that forty degrees with a dew point on it, down on the water at midnight, gets into you in a way that twenty degrees in January never does. January cold is dry and honest. It bites you and you put on a coat and you beat it. April cold is wet. It comes up off the river as the air cools and the dew point catches up to the temperature, and it doesn't settle on you all at once. It starts at the edges. It gets up under your cuffs and in through the seams, the moisture working into the places the coat doesn't quite close, and from there it spreads inward until the cold is already inside the coat with you and the coat is just a wet thing you're wearing. You shiver and you shake. By one in the morning your hands have stopped being hands. They're two cold things at the ends of your arms that you tell to do things and they mostly do them, slow.

I tell you about the hands because the hands matter. Hold onto the hands.

I fished the river where it runs through town, down under the

bridge that opens for the big boats. It's a working river, not a postcard. There's a fuel depot on the far side, the big white tanks, and a boat works with a building so long it blocks the whole sky behind it, and the bridge with its center support sitting out in the channel like a tooth and the little concrete house up top where the man sits who swings it open. You wouldn't drive up here to look at it. The Detroiters who come up north looking for the famous falls take one look at this stretch and get back on 75 and keep driving, and good. The river would rather they kept driving too. But I knew that water. I knew where the current pushed and where it slacked behind the support and where the walleye stacked up in the dark waiting for whatever the current brought them. You don't learn that water in a season. You learn it from twenty Aprils of standing in it.

I stood on the town bank and cast across toward the other side. Across the channel from me, dark that night, was the True Value. The hardware store. It had been there a hundred and twelve years, family-owned the whole run, the same name over the door the whole time, and it had closed two years back and nobody had put anything in it since. I'll tell you something I've never been able to explain. It made me sad that it closed. Sad in a low way that I'd feel standing on the bank looking at the dark front of it. And I never shopped there. Not once that I can remember. It was always dirty inside, dust on everything, the floors gone soft, and there was no place to park that wasn't somebody's way, and when I needed a thing I drove to the place out by the highway like everybody else did. So I had no business being sad about it. I hadn't earned the sadness. The store closing took nothing from me that I'd ever used. And still I'd stand there in the dark and look at it and feel something go out of the world that I couldn't name and couldn't account for, a thing gone that I never used but somehow counted on being there. I didn't think about that much at the time. I think about it more now.

Upstream from the dead hardware store was the ferry dock, where the boat ran across to Bois Blanc in the season, and it didn't run at midnight in April, so it sat there dark and tied. Behind the ferry, a street back across the gravel lot, was the bait shop. Closed at that hour

too. The whole far bank was shut up and dark and that was how I liked it. Just me and the water and the bridge and the cold.

And the drunk.

HE WAS THERE most nights I fished, propped back on the earthen berm that ran up under the bridge abutment, down and to my left, a little below me. I never learned his name and didn't want it. He'd settle in against the slope of the berm like the berm was a recliner and the river was a television, and he'd watch me fish, and he'd drink.

He kept the bottle in a paper bag, and the bag was the one thing about him I ever wondered at. Everybody knew what was in it. He wasn't ashamed of the drinking — he'd announce it, practically, slurping at the dark. So the bag wasn't for shame. I worked it out eventually, or told myself I had. He'd gone from 5 O'Clock to Caliber. Caliber was the cheapest vodka they sold, the absolute floor, the stuff on the bottom shelf with the dust on it. With 5 O'Clock a man could still tell himself it was a choice, a man economizing. Caliber wasn't a choice. Caliber was the bottom and everybody who saw the label knew it was the bottom. So he bagged it. Not to hide the drinking. To hide how far down the drinking had gone.

I want to be honest about how I felt about him, because it matters to what came after.

He disgusted me. I don't have a softer word and I won't reach for one. The opener was the closest thing I had to something sacred — my father's thing, his father's, the one night of the year the order of the world felt right to me — and every year there he was, soaking it in, a wet rotten smell coming off him when the air moved wrong, slurping at me out of the dark. He had a rotation of things he'd holler. Every cast that came back empty he'd want me to wiggle its wiener, jerk the gerkin, work the worm, on and on, the same six filthy stupid lines, delighted with himself every time as if he'd just thought of it. And when I'd haul one in he'd holler told ya so, like the fish were his, like he'd called it, like he had one single thing to do with the four good walleye going cold in my cooler. I'd grunt and not look at him and bait

up and cast again and wish, with a real heat, that he would get up off my river and take his bag and his smell and go die somewhere out of my sight.

I'm not proud of it. I'm telling you because it's true and because of what it cost me later, not being able to take it back.

That night by eleven I had four in the cooler. All keepers, all caught the right way, which is the only way I know how to tell you about walleye, so let me try.

You don't catch a walleye the way you catch other fish. A bass hits the lure like it's mad at it. A pike tries to take your arm off. You feel those in your shoulder. A walleye is different. A walleye comes up under the bait in the dark and takes it into its mouth and then it just holds it. It doesn't run. It doesn't swallow. It sits there in the current with your hook inside its mouth and it thinks about it, and the whole time you can't see any of this, it's black water and you've got fifty feet of line out, so the only thing you have is what comes up the line into your fingers. And what comes up is not a tug. People always think it'll be a tug. It's the opposite of a tug. It's a stillness. A weight that wasn't on the line a second ago, a kind of heaviness that arrives and then doesn't move, like the lure swam into a wall and stopped. The whole river is moving and your line goes still inside it. That's the bite. That's the take. And then you have maybe a second, two, before the fish works out that the thing in its mouth has a hook in it, and in that second you have to set, you have to drive the hook home while it's still sitting there deciding, because once it decides it spits the lure and is gone and you never even knew how close you came.

So feeling it is everything. It's the whole skill. There's no rod stiff enough or reel good enough to make up for not feeling it. You have to know that change in the line — that stillness coming on, that weight settling in where there was none — and you have to know it in cold fingers at midnight with the dew on you, and you have to know it so deep in your hands that you don't think about it, you just set, because thinking is already too slow.

And here's the thing about that knowing, the thing I didn't understand the weight of until years after. Once you've felt it, you can't not

feel it. It's not a skill you can lose. It goes in and it stays. Twenty years of Aprils and it was in my hands the way my own pulse was. I could have felt that bite asleep. I could have felt it dead. There is no version of me standing on that bank that does not feel a walleye take the bait.

THE BIG ONE came after midnight, and I want to slow down here, because this is the part I've gone over more times than any other thing in my life, and I still can't make it lie flat.

I cast up under the center support, up into the slack water behind that tooth of concrete where the current split around it, because that's where the big ones lay, out of the push, waiting for the river to bring them what they wanted. A chartreuse Rapala. I let it swing down on the current, feeling it through the rod, that little knock and wobble of the bait working in the water, and I was just bringing my hand up to start the retrieve, just thinking it's time to bring her back, when the swing stopped.

The line stopped swinging downstream.

And it went the other way.

It went upstream. Against the current. Out from under the support and up the channel, toward the far bank, toward the dead hardware store and past it toward the ferry and the bait shop, steady and smooth, no jerk to it, the line cutting up the black water in a slow straight line against everything the river was doing. I stood there and watched my line go upstream and I did not move. I want to be able to tell you I struck, I reacted, I did some quick thing. I didn't. I watched it. It went a good hundred feet up against the current, a hundred feet, peeling off my reel in that smooth steady pull, while I stood with my rod tip dead and my mouth dry, and only then — a hundred feet up, off toward the closed-up far bank — did the weight come onto the line.

Came onto it. The stillness, the heaviness, the take. The thing I have felt ten thousand times and cannot not feel.

I didn't feel it.

That's the part. That's the part I can't make lie flat. The bite came

and I did not feel it come. There was no stillness arriving in my fingers, no weight settling in. One moment the line was running up the river light and free and the next there was a heaviness on the end of it, already there, already set into it, a hundred feet away in the dark, and I had not felt the change. I felt the having-of-weight. I never felt the coming-of-it. By then I'd already set the hook — set it out of habit, the body doing the thing twenty Aprils had trained it to do without waiting on me to tell it. And here's how I knew, even then, that something was wrong. There was no spike. You set the hook on a fish and your whole body lights up, that jolt, that flood, the best feeling there is. I set the hook into that weight and got nothing. No jolt. No flood. My arm did the work and my blood stayed flat. I'd hooked the fish of my life and my body knew before I did that I hadn't caught anything.

I told myself my hands were just too cold. That's what I told myself. Forty degrees and a dew point and fingers gone to wood, of course I missed the take, anybody would. I have told myself that for going on thirty years and I have never once believed it for longer than it takes to say.

Because the hands don't fail at that. That's the whole point of the hands. That's why I told you to hold onto them.

I've wondered since whether it was only the line that went wrong, or whether the river itself turned for that little while. Whether the whole current reversed under the bridge for the length of one cast and ran backward up its own channel and then turned again and ran right and I just never clocked it. I try to remember the water. I try to remember the foam — there's always foam, scum, a little raft of it that collects in the slack pools behind the support, and if the current had truly reversed that foam would've had to move, would've had to slide upstream too, and I try to picture whether it did. And I can't. I cannot get the memory to hold still long enough to look at the foam. Maybe the pools don't change with the flow. Maybe the foam stays put in the slack no matter what the main channel does and there's nothing there to tell me anything. I've stood on that bank in daylight years later and looked at the foam and tried to reason it out and I never can. The river won't tell me and the memory won't hold and I've made my

peace with not knowing, which is a lie, but it's the most peace I've got.

I brought it in.

It didn't fight.

Eleven pounds. Thirty-three inches. The biggest walleye I have ever caught and the biggest I will ever catch, and it came across that black water without one run in it. No head shake. No dive. No throb in the rod past the dead drag of its weight coming toward me through the current. An eleven-pound walleye is a strong animal. It should have taken line. It should have made me work, made me ease it and let it go and bring it back three times before it came to hand. This one came in like a wet log I was hauling up out of the river, straight and heavy and done, and I stood there reeling a thing that was the size of a fish of a lifetime and felt none of the things you're supposed to feel pulling one in, felt instead a coldness up the back of my neck that wasn't the dew.

It came up the bank into the grass and lay there. And it looked at me. They all look at you, a fish on the bank, the eye doesn't close, that doesn't mean anything. I know it doesn't mean anything. It lay there in the grass at midnight, thirty-three inches of it, and the eye was on me, and I bent and got my hands on it to get the hook out and the body of it was wrong under my hands in a way I felt and could not name, too still, too easy, no fight left in it and somehow no fight ever in it, and I got the hook free and I should have been the happiest man in the county.

I turned to find the drunk.

I'm going to be honest about this the way I've been honest about the rest. The first thing I did, the fish of my life on the grass at my feet, was turn to that man I despised to get my told ya so. Because there was nobody else. Because at the bottom of it, on a cold bank at midnight, he was the only other living soul who'd seen, and a thing isn't real until somebody else has seen it, even if the somebody is a man you've spent all night wishing dead. I turned to the berm, down and to my left, for the one filthy holler that would make the biggest fish of my life into a thing that had actually happened.

He wasn't there.

The berm was empty. The slope of it ran up dark under the abutment and there was no shape on it, no bag, no bottle, nothing. The grass wasn't even pressed where he'd been, or if it was I couldn't see it in the dark, and I stood there with my heart going and looked at the empty berm where a man had been not twenty minutes before, a man too drunk to walk a straight line, who'd have had to get up and gather himself and go up the bank and out, past me, in the open, on a quiet night where I'd have heard every stumbling step.

I never heard him go. I never saw him leave.

WE ATE the four good ones over the next week, my wife and I, and they were fine, they were what walleye is, the best eating fish there is and I'll fight a man who says otherwise. The big one I cleaned last and cooked separate, a Sunday, and it didn't taste right. I won't try to tell you more than that because I've tried before and there are no words that don't make it more than it was or less. It didn't taste right. My wife took one bite and set her fork down and didn't take another and she didn't make a thing of it, just quietly didn't eat it, and I'm glad now, glad all the way down, that she stopped at the one. I had two. I told myself it was fine and I had two bites of it to prove the point to myself and then I scraped the rest into the trash and I have never been so glad of anything as I am that I stopped at two.

That summer the webbing came in between my toes.

Both feet. The first gap and the second, on each foot, a thin web of skin pulled up tight between the toes where there'd been nothing but the clean split of them my whole life. I noticed it in June, barefoot on the dock, looked down and there it was like it had always been there, and it hadn't. I told myself skin tags. I told myself a lot of things that summer and skin tags was the easiest so it's the one I said most. I told myself it was a thing that happens to a body getting older, a thing I'd just never looked close enough to notice before. They never went away. Thirty years and they have never gone away and they are there

right now as I write this, and I stopped telling myself anything about them a long time ago.

That was the year I understood that Sturgeon Falls is more than a place. I'd lived here my whole life and fished that river since I was a boy and I never knew it, not really, not in the part of me that knew the walleye bite, until that April. And that was the year I started writing these down. The things that happen here. The things people tell me and the things I've seen myself. I write them down because they're real and because somebody should and because the writing is the only thing I've found that keeps the not-knowing at a distance I can stand. You'll read them and you'll be entertained, the best of you, and the rest won't believe a word, and that's all right. I'm not writing to be believed.

I don't fish the opener anymore. I gave it up that next year and never went back to it and my father, if he's anywhere, knows why and forgives me.

But I go down to the river still. Warm evenings, in the summer, when the water's low and green and the foam sits in the slack pools behind the support not telling me anything. I go down and I sit on the bank where I stood that night, and I take off my shoes, and I put my feet down into the water off the edge.

I think that fish used all it had just coming through. Coming through what, I don't know and have never known and don't reach for anymore. But it spent everything getting here, and it had nothing left to fight me with, and whatever was left over after it spent itself it left in me, between my toes, that summer.

When I sit at the river now and dangle my feet in I can feel the pull, wanting to go back.

