

**SNAGGED** (excerpts)

Fireflies flash like heat lightning over the field next to the motel. Across the street, the drive-thru's full and you can tell these people are here for the tournament. Big bass bumper stickers and license plates from out of state.

Dad says bumper stickers are like hickeys. They're ugly and they tell everybody your business. He says, the only ones who should know your business are yourself, God, and your wife. But the last one should know, only if the second one doesn't answer.

"*Verdammt sei!*" Dad uses Pennsylvania Dutch when he's mad, "Are you daydreaming, again?" he says and smacks me upside the head.

His face is so close to mine, it's hard to tell the difference between him and the Dale Earnhardt Sr. logo on his shirt.

"I'm looking at the boat," It's more the shock than the sting that makes my eyes water, and rubbing it doesn't help, "Why is the roof gone?"

"It's called a bimini," his tongue packs the chewing tobacco in his lower lip, "I tossed it," he turns and raises his voice, "Now show this lady your hind legs."

Standing behind him is the motel manager. Red-eyes holding a coffee cup and a Walkie-Talkie. Her hands are on her hips and I can tell by her eyebrows Dad said something he shouldn't've.

"Lift your pant leg, dammit."

His eyebrows criss-cross, so I lift my pant leg and show the lady about twenty little red marks Dad had me pinch into my calf ten minutes before leaving to checkout.

The lady covers her mouth with her hand.

"See? Bedbugs!" Dad screams.

"Mr. Fink," she whispers, looking around the parking lot. "Please keep your voice down."

"How can I keep my voice down when my kin were eaten alive? You better make this right! I used my savin's on this shithole and we got *eaten alive!*"

"Mr Fink," the woman whispers and takes a step over. Dad pockets his hands in his bluejeans.

"We can work out a refund for the room inside. Just please follow me into the lobby."

"Check the bait before I'm back," Dad says and follows the lady.

Before the automatic doors slide close he looks back and winks.

“Oliver, I’m tangled.”

Kevin hobbles behind me, wearing the waders I wore last year, wrapped in fishing line like a gas station Christmas tree.

“You gotta hook the eyes,” I say and unwind the fishing line.

“Look,” I stand the pole on the macadam, “See these six hoops on the pole?”

Kevin’s eyes follow my finger as I point at the guides rising up the pole.

“These are eyes. When you’re done fishin’ or you gotta move your pole somewhere, take your hook, and hitch it on one of the eyes. Top of the rod should bend a bit.”

I step back and wave the thing like a fencing sword, “See?”

Kevin grabs his hook and hooks an eye. I set my pole under his chin.

“On guard,” I shout, smacking his pole, “You ready to die?”

Kevin takes a big-league swing but I dip. He chases. Instead of fencing, it’s more like a bullfight.

Dad’s voice booms, “*Gott verdammt sei, Junge!*”

The motel doors open behind us, Dad beelining.

I hold my ground as Kevin steps back.

Dad smacks me upside the head. It stings even when I know it’s coming.

“These look like lightsabers?”

“No,” Kevin says, moving the zipper up and down his vest. He fidgets whenever he feels like puking.

Dad’s shadow swallows Kevin, “Why the *fuck* you twirlin’ ‘em around like they are?”

“And you’re the worst one!” Dad spins towards me so I step back, “How many times I gotta tell you about dickin’ around?”

“What’d I tell you about dickin’ around?”

He slaps me upside the head.

“Keep dickin’ around and I’ll leave ya here. Think I’m kiddin’?”

I listen to the songbirds as Kevin stares at the ground.

Dad spits black near my feet.

“Now we’re late. Get in the goddamn truck.”

In the rearview, I watch him pull the sticker he got from my uncle out of his jacket and press it onto the side of the boat where the paint dried overnight.

He slams the door sliding the truck and we start another silent drive.



This isn't our boat. We don't own a boat. I don't even think Dad owns his truck. We met my Uncle Miles in Johnstown last night on our way to the tournament.

When we got there we backed into a driveway. Our tail lights lit my uncle's face red as he stood in the garage working a putty knife against the side of a pontoon boat. Pit stains. Paint chips falling to his feet.

By the time Dad got out of the truck, Uncle Miles was already repainting what he scraped off. He didn't come to the window. No hellos. He finished painting, hitched the boat to the truck and handed Dad a sticker: PA-5504. They didn't even shake hands when it was over.

Back in the car, Kevin fell back asleep, so I whispered, "Uncle Miles's had a nice garage. looked pretty nice."

"That wasn't his garage," Dad said, then spat out the window, "That wasn't even his house."

The rest of that ride was silent, too.



On some of those spring days when Dad would pick me up early from school, we wouldn't go fishing right away. First we'd have to renew our fishing licenses. Not every time, but when we did, we went to the same place.

The first time I thought we were going to Mom's office, but we drove past her turn and stopped at this little gas station down the street. It looked like a gas station, except the filling stations were always wrapped in trash bags.

Every time we pulled into the parking lot, there was a blonde lady behind the glass doors of the gas station smiling real big, wiggling her fingers instead of waving. We'd park behind the building and Dad would say, "I'm leaving the keys here. And don't leave for any reason. Not even if the building catches fire."

By the fourth or fifth time, I had it memorized. He'd get out of the truck, scan the parking lot and go into the gas station through the back door.

I used to think renewing your fishing license was real work. Each time Dad came out of the gas station, he'd have to tighten his belt, or zip up his fly, or run back in because his wallet must've fallen out. But if I was patient, he'd bring me a can of birch beer under his arm. He'd get in the car with little sweat beads under his mustache, or a red face, or his collar up when before

it was down, and he'd hand me the birch beer and say, "it's time for fishin'". Those were the only times he let me drink soda.

One time he didn't come out with any birch beer. Or the fishing licenses. One time, the backdoor whipped open. Dad shot out pulling his pants up and holding his hat to his head. His dick hard. The reason his pants were stuck. Behind him was an Indian man on a cellphone. The blonde lady stood crying behind him, folding her fingers together like she was praying.

Dad's dick was still out when he got in the car. Piercing red, still hard and I wondered when I'd get balls. He starts the car, reverses out of the parking lot and onto the street. When we pass Mom's turn, his shirts tucked in and he's eyeing the rearview mirror.

When we got home Dad didn't get out of the car right away. He just looked through the windshield at the deer heads hanging in the garage. I wasn't sure if he was talkin' to me or the deer heads, but he said, "Getting caught is what makes you stupid. Everything before is just a risk." "Not only my partner, but my partner in crime"



The only fish I ever got mounted, I didn't even catch. It's a lie we still tell to anyone who walks into my room.

Sometimes on Spring days, when Kevin wasn't old enough to fish, Dad would pull me out of school early. He'd wink at me from the hall, then tell my teachers there was a family emergency. We'd leave the lobby, Dad elbowing me, and I'd do what we practiced and pop my lower lip out, looking sad.

As soon as we were in the car, Dad popped in a Fuel CD and I knew we were going fishing.

We had a spot out past the cement plant, past the trespassing signs.

"Nobody owns the crick," Dad would say.

We fished on earthworms and corn until our ankles went numb, but no bites. The sun set. The gnats swarmed. On the last cast, I swear, it was the last cast, Dad hooked a monster. His line shot up stream, dragging him into water up to his knees. The drag whistled like a teapot as his forearms flexed lifting the rod and then it happened.

"Get over here and watch," he yelled.

That fish lapped every inch of the crick as Dad's eyes fixed on the chop of the water.

Then he held out his rod, "You got him."

I hesitated. Dad stuffed the pole in my hands and as soon as I grabbed the reel, the fish yanked me into water above the waist.

Dad caught me by the vest, holding tight, whispering when to reel and when to let up.

Dad used a flashlight when I finally back-stepped out of the water and a rainbow trout, half-the size of me and with more color than anything you've ever seen bent in the sky, flopped open-mouth on the shore in front of us.

"That's damn near the biggest fish I've ever seen," Dad said, hollering about how it could make the paper, how we need to get a picture.

"But Dad," I stopped him, "You caught it."

Dad stayed staring, tilted his head, then strung the fish on a stringer and hustled up the riverbank.

At Holzinger's bait shop, Holzinger himself asked who caught it. I thought for sure the old man knew Dad was lying when I dragged the fishtail across the tile and to the counter.

But Holzinger just slapped the counter, "No shit!" Then squinted at the scale and waited for the arrow to settle.

"I swear it!" Dad said, "Thought I was losin' a son and a pole! Tough to choose what to save."

Holzinger laughed then pulled a tape measure. The rainbow measured in at 27 inches nose to tail and I got my picture taken.

It still hangs in Holzinger's today.

Back in the truck, Dad started talking about which wall we'd hang it on and how every man mounts his first monster.

But it bothered me, "Dad. You hooked it. It's your monster."

"It's not about who held the rod," he said, "It's about how you tell the story."

By the time we were home, we decided on my bedroom wall.

Some nights when I can't sleep, I stand on my bed and get eye to eye with the monster and ask if he'll keep our secret. I put my ear to its mouth but never hear the ocean.



That first day of fishing was the worst day of fishing. I don't remember who caught what, I just remember how it ended.

I was daydreaming while casting. One of Dad's deadly sins. But he didn't notice, kneeled in the frost behind me, showing Kevin how to hook a worm.

I whipped my arm and the line flung over the water, snagged a pine tree. I yanked and yanked, then whined.

“Quit your bitching,” Dad said and snatched the rod from my hand. He twisted the rod over his back, and in one slow pull the bait shot back and landed in the shallows—the worm still hooked.

“Watch where you’re casting,” Dad said, then mumbled something moving back to Kevin.

I waded in the water, sending the water striders skipping across the surface.

I held the rod with two hands, just like Dad does and took a crow hop—WHOOSH.

But when I swung there was resistance... Then a *yelp*.

Followed by something worse than a scream.

The hook dribbled to my feet. No worm, but a tiny piece of tissue.

“Gott Verdammt sei!” Dad screams, “I said *wait!*”

I turned—blood everywhere. Dad on his knees in the brush, holding his face. Blood gushing and gushing through the spaces between his fingers.

“Dad! I’m sorry!”

“Fuck! Fuck! I’m fucking blind!”

“Daddy!” Kevin said, fidgeting with his zipper.

Dad’s head snapped in my direction. He crawled towards my feet. Clawed up my shirt. Half his face red, the other half white.

“Look what you did!” He yelled.

A minnow-sized gash ripped under his left eye and down to his nose. Two flaps of skin lipping like a split banana peel. Eyes red, both filled with tears. The first time I ever saw a man cry.

The tears made the blood streak down his cheeks and his eyes shot to my feet. His body deflated. I never saw his mouth bend so tight or his shoulders sink below his chest.

Even as he cried, everything was silent.

Then he stood up.

“We’re going home.”

That was the last thing he said to me until the stitches healed over a couple months later. The first and last day of fishing that year.

But after many mornings in the mirror, Dad decided the scar showed a story.

But every time someone asked, he never told the same one.

