



Sleep with the Fishes

Brian M. Wiprud

SLEEP *with the* **FISHES**



BRIAN M. WIPRUD

A Dell Book

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Dedicated to Dr. William K. Runyeon, my uncle, who died while fishing for shad in the Delaware River last June. A singular man and angler, he is much missed.

This tale is also dedicated in some small part to the memory of Frederick Arbogast Schmutt, late of Porters Lake Hunting & Fishing Club, who was oft heard to admonish “Fish often, fish well, and avoid lonely, one-eyed bootleggers.”

We should not be too hasty in bestowing either our praise or censure on mankind, since we shall often find such a mixture of good and evil in the same character, that it may require a very accurate judgment and a very elaborate inquiry to determine on which side the balance turns.

Henry Fielding



Front wheels locked sideways, the Volkswagen Rabbit spun backward, sparks flaring as it snapped the cable guide rail and flipped over the embankment. After a few protracted somersaults, the puckered chassis slammed roof-first onto a pile of boulders. Shattered safety glass rained from the windows and snakes of fire raced up rivulets of gas, igniting the engine. The dark ravine was suddenly dancing with light from the blaze.

Headlights flashed above, and a white Mercury Marquis pulled to a stop on the road. A man in a jogging suit and windbreaker emerged and walked casually to the edge of the embankment, the blaze below reflecting tiny campfires in his eyes. The whole underside of the Rabbit was afire now, and the man figured it would only be a minute before she blew.

“Adios,” he smirked, tugging on one ear absently, turning back toward his Mercury.

A cough sounded in the ravine, and the man froze. Looking both ways along the road, he pulled a small revolver from his waistband. He cocked it, then stepped back to the edge of the ravine and peered down the embankment.

“Oh, that’s just friggin’ beautiful,” he moaned. A bearded man lay sprawled on the rocks below, steam rising from his coughs into the cold night air.

“Oh my God,” drawled a woman’s voice. “There’s been an accident!” The man wheeled around and staggered with surprise.

“What the hell?” He quickly slipped the gun back in his waistband. “Angel! What the...Jesus! What’re you doin’ in my backseat?” he sputtered.

Her painted face twisted into a scowl as she emerged from the blanket she’d been hiding under.

“Well, big shot, mind tellin’ me what you always goin’ out late at night for?” she shrieked. “Sure you keep sayin’ ‘I got business, Angel.’ Business my butt. I’m here to find out who she is.”

“Who?” he yelled, throwing his arms wide. “So help me, Angel, I oughta kill you for this!”

“Sid, I heard you talkin’ tuh Johnny. You said somethin’ about how you got ‘an appointment with Sandra.’” Angel opened the car door and stepped out onto the pavement in her panty-hosed feet. “Ar-

what, for this tramp Sandra, you come all the way up here to Connecticut?" She tugged at her angry sweater.

Another cough echoed up the ravine, and Sid looked anxiously down at the stirring figure below.

"Well, are you just gonna walk back and forth there, flappin' your arms like a pigeon, or are you gonna help the poor guy? Jeez, go on, hurry, he could be dying or something!" Angel wailed, leaning on the car and squeezing scarlet pumps onto her feet.

Flabbergasted and red-faced, Sid ogled his girl-friend's scarlet shoes and shook his head, trying to wake himself from this nightmare. Then he scrambled down the embankment to the victim. Peering into the flaming wreckage, he could see the arm of another victim protruding motionless from where the windshield used to be. He slipped the gun from his waist and put it to the bearded man's head.

"O.K., Evel Knievel, just keep your eyes and your mouth shut, and I'll save your sorry ass, you got that?" It didn't look like the poor schnook could make out much anyway. Probably wouldn't live. So Sid heaved, heaved, heaved, and puffed the bearded guy by the collar up to the shoulder of the road, dropping him none too gently.

"Angel—into the car." Sid wheezed harshly, his white pants and arms smeared with dirt and leaves. "We gotta go get help for this guy." He grabbed Angel by the arm and thrust her into the backseat.

"Hey!" Angel bleated. "What about—"

"Shuddup, already. We gotta hurry, get to a phone, get this guy an ambulance or somethin'." He could hear a truck shifting gears, a possible witness, coming up the hill. The Mercury's engine revved, its tires squealed, and it sped quickly away.

There was a whoosh like a sudden drumroll as the gasoline around the Rabbit caught fire. Shrieking flames burst the gas tank, and the bearded man's crumpled form was silhouetted by an ascending swirl of fire.

“You jerks wanna know what you can do with your Witness Protection Program? Don’t worry, I’ll fill in that blank for you. Hey, I did a thing for you, I ratted out these guys. Look at me, I’m thirty-three years old—all I want is the short stint. And when I get out...Well, I been takin’ care of myself this far. So it’s this way: the Feds’ll save a lot of green not havin’ to babysit me my whole life. I want you to consider that when my sentence comes down—know what I’m talking about?”

Oh, the Feds had warned Sid about the dangers, that outside of the WPP he might well get chopped up and otherwise disemboweled by his former comrades in the Palfutti family. But before Sid decided to turn state’s evidence, before he testified, he’d worked out another kind of deal. The rival Camuchis family had made arrangements with his shark of a lawyer to insure that Sid would rat out his confederates at their trials, and in such a way as to scuttle the Palfutti family once and for all. In return, the Camuchis would see to it that any Palfuttis that were not arrested as a result of his testimony were in no position to whack Sid. As a token of their confidence, they’d made a tidy \$500,000 honorarium to the Sid Bifulco Defense Fund. The Camuchis were, in effect, buying up the Palfutti turf and rackets for a song.

And so with the deal from both the Feds and the Camuchis in his pocket, Sid took the stand. Days in the Trenton, New Jersey, courtroom were tense as a succession of Palfutti defendants gave Sid the evil eye. But Sid, a sinewy guy with salt-and-pepper hair, remained impassive. He seemed calm, confident, and matter-of-fact. Hours of scratchy recordings, expert testimony, and lawyers’ charts filled the weeks. And of course there was the small matter of cross-examination.

“Mr. Bifulco, could you tell the court how you came upon the nickname ‘Sleep’?” The defense attorney looked like a tall gray heron with a frog caught in his throat.

“Yeah, I could tell you.” Sid laced his fingers into a teepee and focused his dark eyes beyond the rail of the witness box and onto the stenographer’s red pumps.

“Could you elaborate for the jury, Mr. Bifulco?” The tall gray bird eyed the jury knowingly.

“Sure.” Sid cleared his throat. “It’s cause when I whacked a guy...”

“You mean when you murdered someone, don’t you, Mr. Bifulco?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. When I *killed* a guy, I usually put him to sleep. First I sapped ’em, then

either, you know, suffocated 'em or injected 'em with procaine. Nice an' easy. No blood to clean up, no strugglin' or nothin'. Johnny Fest made funna me. Called me Sleep. So it stuck. See, Johnny was the kinda guy that liked a guy to know he was gettin' whacked, liked the guy to—”

“Mr. Bifulco! Could you do something for me? Could you please just try and concentrate on the question? Hmm?”

Directly across from the witness stand sat Bluto incarnate, a brooding hulk squeezed into a double-breasted suit. His name was Johnny Fest, a captain in the Palfutti family who moodily examined the ceiling and cracked his knuckles.

Every time Sid mentioned Johnny, defendant Fest popped a knuckle or two. It sounded like someone snapping ice trays and made it hard for Sid to keep his eyes on the stenographer's shoes.

“Could you tell us, Mr. Bifulco, how many people you personally ‘put to sleep’—that is, *murdered*—in your career as a hoodlum?” The heron cocked an alarmed eye back at the jury.

“Sure. Something like ten,” Sid lied, shrugging at the judge as if he'd accidentally run over a car. Confessing to murder didn't faze him. When you were part of a crew, such admissions—albeit mostly by implication—were not only commonplace but also necessary. A reputation for “doing a thing” maintained the respect and fear necessary for a fruitful career. Sid was only concerned that more than the paltry ten murders could be pinned on him, possibly pushing his parole eligibility into the next decade.

“Something like ten. ‘Something like’ ten murders.” The heron ruffled his feathers, stretched his wings, and began to squawk. “*How can a person who can't even remember how many people he murdered remember who other people murdered?*”

Sid grinned bitterly and wondered how a guy like himself could get in such a jam over red high heels. He knew a lot of guys who had drinking problems, and then there were some who ended up with coke habits. Others couldn't successfully cheat on their wives, and had business meetings broken up by embarrassing confrontations. These guys got warnings, and then the next thing you knew they got popped. But Sid wasn't a heavy drinker, a coke dog, or sloppily married. For a single mob lieutenant his vice seemed quite pedestrian: Bifulco liked women, and he had a particular overwhelming fondness for red shoes. It was the ladies in hot pumps who always seemed to make Sid lose his head and get in trouble.

Long knobby legs carried the defense attorney around and around the courtroom, and Mr. Bifulco was compelled to recount all of his ten murders, which he did matter-of-factly, if not rather absentmindedly. Hands locked in a wigwam on his lap, Sid clamped his dark eyes on those shoes and tried to ignore the sound of ice trays cracking off to his left. He was just glad that the big gray bird hadn't wheeled an accusing hand at him and said, “So, Mr. Bifulco, isn't it true that you're a sucker for ladies in red shoes? That, in fact, you were once almost killed because of red shoes? That, in fact, your *downfall* was because of your love—or maybe I should say fetish?—for red shoes? Mr. Bifulco, please answer the question.”

Sid's curse had plagued him since he was twelve. Saturday nights he and his pals would spy couples steaming up car windows by the Passaic River bulkhead, Pulaski Skyway rusting and twinkling overhead. From within the upholstered shadows of the huge old Chevys, Oldsmobiles, and Buicks rocked mating rhythms. Faces were never seen, just glimpses of flesh, flashes of belt buckle, feet, pleated skirts, and hands, the jujitsu of love punctuated by muffled yelps, giggles, gasps, and curses. And eventually, there were shoes, women's shoes in the air, against the window where Sid's face was pressed. Sometimes the shoes fell off early, as soon as the feet went in the air, or before. Sometimes the shoes stayed on the whole time, pounding and clawing the glass at Sid's nose. It was a pair of shiny red high heels that finally overwhelmed Sid's pituitary. And when his father discovered the boy washing underwear in the sink, well, it was obvious that it was time to deal with Sid's sexual awakening. Removing his belt, Father Bifulco gave the lad a memorable beating.

That was only the first time red shoes got Sid in dutch. He had dodged the shoe bullet on several occasions. After a few years, and any number of encounters with amateur, semipro, and professional women, a stray red shoe was a common sight either in Sid's car or his apartment. Recording his conversations had been as easy as tossing a pair of red shoes with wireless mics into his white Mercury Marquis.

The Feds said he'd done a good job. The papers blared "COOL RAT." But the job was neither good nor cool. It was what Sid Bifulco, thirty-three years old, needed to do to save whatever he had left of his life ruined by a pair of flame-red suede pumps with transmitters in the heels. The Feds had taped over a hundred hours of conversation in which he and associates had discussed innumerable felonies, with shoes hidden under the front seat of his car.

In his deal with the prosecutors, Sid pulled down a twelve-year stint in exchange for putting his colleagues away for life—and he'd be eligible for parole in seven. What was left of the Palfutti criminal family when Sid got through testifying against them was either absorbed by the New York crowd or dispatched by them, or both.

Nobody bothered Sid in prison because, well, you just don't tease a guy with ten notches in his gut. But he was hardly a cell-block heavy. He was a malefactor who rationalized his capital crimes as the humane approach to eliminating the jerks who'd "get whacked anyhow"—probably quite unpleasant at the hands of Johnny Fest. Sid Bifulco was a wiseguy with sensibilities, whereas Johnny Fest's confrontational aesthetic might involve shoving a pigeon down a victim's throat, cutting off his dick, and throwing him from a twelve-story building.

Sid's victims had fatal car accidents, or they simply vanished, in which case he never divulged their final resting places. He would carefully fold his victim up in the trunk and drive him a couple hours west to the Delaware River Valley—if for no other reason than he found a nighttime drive in the country a strangely pleasant departure from Newark and the workaday whirl of contraband and extortion rackets.

And it was to just such pastoral scenery that Sid's mind turned ever more frequently in prison. As he strolled the yard, weaving between knots of cigarette-smoking convicts, Sid pondered his future. After all, he might not have been headed for the WPP but he sure as shinola couldn't return to Newark, much less his old line of work. Then again, with the remainder of his defense fund and triple that

sundry nest eggs, he could get by without a vocation. But Newark was all he knew—that and being hood.

Sunny scenic tours of the Delaware Valley filled his daydreams, first as only something to mask the grim penitentiary life, then as the object of his post-prison life. Sid didn't really believe it could happen. After all, what would a guy like Sid do out there in the woods? Other than dump bodies, that is?

Magazines in prison can be hot commodities. Especially those with girls in them, the more skin the better. Or with guys in them, the more skin the better. But even though his fellow inmates respected him, Sid was low in the pecking order because he wasn't willing to jeopardize his early parole by pummeling his way up to Top Rooster. This meant that when the magazines came around he got *Highlights* and *Woodcraft Quarterly*. Well, there was also *Sports Astream* and maybe *Rod & Rifle*, but all references to and articles about guns and hunting had been edited out. And who wants to read about fish in the joint? After a few months of Goofus and Gallant, connect-the-dots, and centerfolds featuring "Wood Glues of the World," Sid picked up an outdoor magazine. It was nice to look at the pictures—they reminded him of the Delaware Valley. And sometimes there was an ad with a picture of a girl in red hiking boots. Better than nothing. Then there were the articles, which he began to read ever more avidly. A couple of issues later, the Deputy Warden found he had an appointment with a certain Mr. Bifulco.

Feet up on his desk, the D.W. carved at a fingernail with a shiv that had been stabbed in his side during a cafeteria melee two years before. Missed his kidney by a bologna rind. A gristly old guard ushered Sid into the office and stood him before the desk. As was his way, the D.W. didn't say anything for some minutes. He liked the cons to feel uncomfortable. That was his job, after all.

"Well, Bifulco," he finally drawled, adjusting his clip-on tie. "What can I do for you today?" Sarcasm, thick as peanut butter.

Sid spoke.

The D.W.'s feet hit the floor.

"A what?"

"A fishing rod."

The D.W. had a laugh like a spoon caught in the garbage disposal. But he brought it to an abrupt stop.

"All right, Bifulco: why?"

"I wanna learn how to fish." Sid shrugged.

"Bifulco, the only fish around here is on a bun with tartar sauce. What're you gonna fish for?"

"I wanna learn how, that's all, without the fish. I thought, y'know, I could learn to like cast and

stuff, like out on the athletic field.”

“No way, Bifulco. Get outta here.” The D.W. waved both hands at him like he was sending a baked meat loaf back to the cook. The guard put a hand on Bifulco’s shoulder.

“Just thought I’d ask. I’m no troublemaker. I’m just in for my seven.” Sid was already out the door.

But he didn’t give up. A letter to the Warden diplomatically broached the subject. Shortly thereafter, the gristly guard appeared at his cell and croaked: “Time to see the Warden, Bifulco.”

Sid soon found himself in the company of the flashy blue sailfish and great red sockeye salmon flanking the Warden’s oak-paneled office.

“By God, Bifulco, what kind of man asks for a fishing rod in a federal penitentiary?” Warden Lachfurst thundered. He was small and bald, with round spectacles that flashed like half-dollars.

Sid didn’t know how to answer. He didn’t get a chance to.

“I’ll tell you what kind of man, dammit! An Outdoors Man, Bifulco. Is that what you are? An Outdoors Man?” Lachfurst fastened both fists to the desktop, leaned forward, and attempted to wither Sid with the heat of his scrutiny.

Sid folded his arms, raised his chin, and spoke forthrightly. “Well, Warden, you ask me, I’d say there’s only one way to find out.”

Taken aback by the cut of Sid’s jib, Lachfurst came to attention, tapping a knuckle on the desktop.

Twenty-four days later, Sid had his rod.

At first the Warden just made a point of training the brass telescope perched in his office window on the athletic field. Then he happened by, gave Sid a few pointers. Then there was another official visit, a few fish stories, and then the fly rod and a how-to book. Then the fly-tying kit. And damned if Lachfurst didn’t have Sid make up a bunch of salmon flies for the Warden’s annual trip to Labrador.

Worm and bobber fishing didn’t hook Sid “Sleep” Bifulco. It was the serious business of tackle fishing, of search and destroy. Catalogs filled with lures, lines, weapons, and gadgets. Magazines brimming with technique, exotic locales, and brash leaping fish. It all had a certain sense of fraternity, a sense of craft, hunt, and danger that Sid, a hood, enjoyed. Angling wasn’t just about whacking fish, it was about the respect that came with being a whacker of fish. And it took hold of Sid as if angling was what he’d always been meant for, as if being a wise-guy was a soured career turn. Besides, he’d grown fond of red hiking boots.

Sid Bifulco—Izaak Walton reincarnate.

Cryptobranchus alleganiensis is a salamander of grand proportions. It has a record length of twenty-nine inches and almost exclusively haunts rocky-bottomed segments of the Susquehanna River. By all reports, this muddy, girthsome, and deeply wrinkled beast is like some aquatic English bulldog, and twice as handsome. They call them hellbenders, and their apocryphal appearances in the Delaware River are favored upon a dot on the map labeled Hellbender Eddy, Pennsylvania. There hadn't been a sighting of one since 1888.

Just where the river stumbles down a set of rapids, a large, slowly swirling pool forms the famous Hellbender Eddy. Pink Creek sneaks in at this bay, and a trail beside it connects the river bend to the town of Hellbender Eddy. It's a wee burg wedged between the river and the steep side of Little Hourglass Mountain, which is really more like a hill.

The better part of sixty minutes from any interstate, Hellbender Eddy is more than two and a half hours from New York City. It's situated on the winding, circuitous Route 241, across the river from New York. It has only one antique store and neither fresh bagels nor the Sunday *New York Times*. There are a few holiday cabins, mostly owned by Scranton businessmen. Downtown is comprised of a single restaurant—Chik's Five Star Diner—and little else.

It was a frosty May dawn, and the counter at Chik's was filled with locals. The joint was old, the walls painted a zillion coats of cream semigloss, its Formica counter stalwart, long, and black. White and black tiles made a checkerboard of the floor, and deco wall sconces gave the place a dull warm glow. A giant urn brewed coffee by the gallon, residual steam making the hashery mighty humid indeed. Two potted palms in the back thought they'd died and gone to heaven.

On weekdays, most of the locals drifted through Chik's for a container of coffee and a sauna.

Big Bob Stillwell and Little Bob Cropsey made their usual appearance on the way to the construction site where they worked.

"G'morning, fellahs." Chik smiled, his pencil-thin mustache curling devilishly. "Usual?"

Little Bob was poking around Big Bob's jump-suited girth with an old VHS camcorder he bought

a tag sale. “Yes, Chik, we will have the usual. Tell us what the usual is, Chik.”

Chik looked into the lens, hesitating and smoothing his hair.

Big Bob lifted a meaty arm and looked down at Little Bob like something in his armpit stank.

“Must ya fool with that darn thing so early in the mornin’?” Big Bob let his arm drop and turned Chik. “Not the usual. Just coffee and buttered rolls. Gotta cut out the fat.” Big Bob punched himself the gut.

“Chik, look into the camera. I want the usual. I don’t got no weight problem.” Chik smoothed his mustache and flashed a dirty smile at the camera. Then Little Bob saw Big Bob’s unshaven face fill the view screen.

“I ain’t got a ‘weight problem.’ I’m not talkin’ about fat, I’m talkin’ about cholesterol. Eggs and bacon is cholesterol, Bob. Cholesterol is bad for ya too. Don’t ya even read the papers? Chik: coffee and rolls.” Big Bob was a faithful reader of *Newstime* magazine and considered himself quite the scholar of current events. As a heavy equipment operator on major construction projects, there were plentiful lulls in the pile-driving that could be spent memorizing the news.

“Hey, Doc.” Little Bob squirreled over to Lloyd Conti, who was farther down the counter. “Tell me about cholesterol, Doc. Into the camera.” Video Bob was also an equipment operator, but unlike Big Bob, his job kept him busy switching between backhoes and front loaders.

Lloyd swiveled on his stool, mopping his lips and Vandyke with a paper napkin. A pack of plastic tipped cheroots peeked from a top pocket.

“Bob, I am not a doctor. I keep telling ya that. Just ’cause I do electrolysis doesn’t mean I’m a doctor. And do ya think that if I were a doctor I’d be doin’ small engine repair on the side? Don’t ya think I’d be removing gallbladders or somethin’?” Lloyd turned back to his breakfast.

“Hey, Bob. Come ’ere, I’ll tell ya about cholesterol!” Jenny Baker was down at the last stool, cracked leather jacket draped over her shoulders and her blond hair pinned to the top of her head with a cocktail stirrer. A bit of a looker past her prime, Jenny drove a ten-wheel tanker for Red Eft Trout Farms. Everyone knew the routine: Chik liked to toy with her, get a little fresh, make her take a swig at him. It had become a game of sorts. He kept tally with a pencil on the side of the coffee urn.

“O.K., Jenny, tell us about cholesterol. Why is it bad for skinny people?” Little Bob stalked over to Jenny, zooming in and out on the beguiling smile she’d worked up for him.

“Lemme show ya. See this piece of toast? Ya focused your little camera on it?”

“Got it, Jenny. Now what?”

“Well, see how when I dip it in the egg yella? That there, stuck to the end of my toast? Come in real close now.”

“Got it, Jenny. Now what?”

“That’s cholesterol.”

“But why is it bad for skinny people? It don’t make us fat.”

“No it doesn’t, Little Bob. But it ain’t too good for their video cameras.”

Bob’s image of Jenny was suddenly smeared yolk yellow.

“Hey! Hey! Ya put egg yella on my lens!” Little Bob poked his camera around looking for a napkin. Gentle early morning chuckles rippled through the patrons. Little Bob felt a clamp on the back of his neck. It was Big Bob’s meaty grasp.

“Must ya fool with that darn thing this early in the mornin’? C’mon, we got our stuff, now let’s let these folks breakfast in peace.” Big Bob led his stooped protégé out the door just as Russ Smon slipped past them with a sleepy nod.

“How ya doin’, Russ?” Chik was freshening coffees along the counter. “Heard you got into the sha real good last week. How many does that make it now?”

“Yeah, they’re comin’ up. Small bunches, all bucks.” Russ was sandy-haired, with a prominent jaw, squinty eyes, and an edgy manner that betrayed the hardships of rural life. But strictly speaking, Russ wasn’t a local. He hailed from Hartford, where he’d been an insurance executive. Pennsylvania became his roost about ten years before, after some domestic trouble, some said. These days he tried to make a go at being an outdoor writer while getting by tying flies and guiding. He lived in a two-tone sagging trailer on a quality slice of riverfront south of Hellbender Eddy. The land was his outright, his total net asset. He’d once had a five-year plan in which he became widely published, hosted a fishing show, and replaced his shack with a palatial log cabin. Now he didn’t make plans beyond the next three weeks.

“But how many does that make it? What’s your total?” Chik persisted. Huge numbers of shad entered the Delaware River each spring to spawn like salmon, and those who angled for them serious kept score.

Russ looked a little uncomfortable, but divulged his tally.

“Seventy-five. Chik, just gimme a half-dozen sticky buns, two cups regular, and fill this thermos O.K.?” Russ plunked his thermos on the Formica and pushed back on his stained fedora, trying not to look at the patrons along the counter as they rustled with awe.

“Seventy-five already, huh? Sure took a quick lead. Got a client this mornin’, do you, Russ?” Chik queried from a cloud of steam at the urn.

“Yeah, I got a sport this morning.” Russ’s gaze wandered over the ceiling before he snatched a glance down the counter. The whole lot was giving him the envious, expectant eye.

“Well?” Russ looked back at them, and they shifted, looking from one to the other. Jenny spoke up

“C’mon, Russ. We want the shad report. Lot of us’ve been to all the usual spots—fish all day and just pick up a handful. Where are ya takin’ ’em? An’ don’t give us that doo-doo about ‘trade secrets’. We ain’t your sports. Not one of us can afford your guiding services. But we are your neighbors, and well, the neighborly thing to do is tell us where you’re takin’ ’em, that’s all. It’s not like there’s a shad shortage or anything, is there, Russ?”

The group grunted, nodding agreement.

Russ worked up a fatigued smile, the only kind he seemed capable of anymore. Living was hard and the rewards increasingly scarce. Either he was up at four a.m. and on the river with a sport jigging for walleye, burning the midnight oil tying up four hundred dry flies to fill an order, or he was huddled next to his kerosene heater laboring on yet another article that would be rejected by *Sports Astream* or *Bass Blaster*.

His transition from amateur to professional angler was complete: he caught a lot of fish and could land enough for three square meals at will. But it was all he could do to stay financially afloat, much less give away freebies to his neighbors.

“Tell you what, Jenny. Neighborly is as neighborly does. You throw some free trout into Ballar Pond for my supper, and I’ll give you a river sweet spot. Lloyd, you give a tune-up on my Evinrude and I’ll point out where and how you just might get that Mr. Musky you’re always talking about. An’ Chik, you...”

“No charge, Mr. Smonig.” Chik winked at Russ and pushed forward the thermos, plastic cups, and a white bag crammed with sticky buns. Russ plucked the pen from behind Chik’s ear, tore out a receipt from his pad, and started to draw a little map. Folks at the counter craned their necks to see. Russ kept lowering his shoulder to block their view.

“There you go, Chik. Walleye. See you use that size Rapala in that color, and troll it right along through those holes just as early in the morning as you can.” Russ collected his stuff and turned sharply to the audience. “Good day, neighbors.” He backed out the door.

Reverend Jim was waiting for him on the porch with one foot on the railing, his sharp red tongue poised in anticipation, and an ocher eye angled up at Russ. The Reverend’s affection for Russ was genuine, but the emotional tie did not keep him from robbing Russ blind. He had been banished from the Smonig abode for stealing coins, and he would loot the truck’s glove box at any opportunity. Russ walked past the Reverend, dipped his shoulder, and the crow hopped on, expressing joy with flicks of his tongue and fanning wings.

The Reverend Jim was named for a popular TV evangelist. As Russ climbed into his truck, the Reverend took his place on the International Harvester’s gearshift knob. He would hop down every time Russ shifted gears, then pop right back up. Turning the pickup’s key for a while, Russ whispered curses at his reluctant ignition and eyed his black thieving friend.

Eating a piece of toast slathered in jam, Jenny sauntered out of the diner and over to the truck.

~~“Well, seeing as how you’re at least willing to barter, might ya accept information? Hey, Reverend Jim—how’s my baby?”~~ Jenny waved at the bird, who uttered a low, curious rattle like dice in a cup.

Russ gave the key a rest. He dished up his fatigued smile for Jenny.

“O.K., Russ, just to show that I for one know how to be neighborly, I’ll give ya the information free and see if your conscience doesn’t do the rest. Ya have a new next-door neighbor.” She chomped her toast, licking grape jam from her lips.

“At the Ballard place, I’ll bet. I heard some cars over there. So?”

“Well, Russ honey, my brother Matt was over there turning on the water and gas and such. And do ya know what he saw?”

She arched an eyebrow. Russ’s eyebrows remained the same.

“I’ll tell ya what he saw. Your new next-door neighbor is not only from the city, but he is also loaded with fishing tackle. He’s got rods sticking out all over the place. And in his pocket he keeps a wad of bills this thick. Tipped Matt ten bucks, just like that.” Jenny shoved the rest of the toast in her mouth.

“Might not need any guiding if he has all that tackle.” Russ’s lips puckered in thought.

“Russ, don’t be a dope,” she said around the toast, swallowing hard. “It don’t matter how many rods he got. He’s not from around here! He doesn’t know the hot spots like you do, now does he?”

Russ’s eyebrows arched. Reverend Jim began clucking impatiently.

“Let’s put it this way, Smonig: if you do get this new neighbor as a sport, I want a little map like you gave Chik, but with an X marking the secret shad spot.” Jenny licked jam from her thumb.

Russ looked up at her sharply.

“It’s a deal.” He cranked the key and seemed to catch the ignition off guard. The truck started.

Like most crows, Reverend Jim was clever to the verge of being psychic. He never failed to show up when Russ was headed for Phennel Rowe’s place, and as it happened Russ planned to drop off some fish fillets there on his way back from the Five Star.

“I hears you got a new neighba’, Mr. Smonig,” Phennel croaked from her gray porch rocker. A hand-painted black and olive sign hung low over the porch steps: “ANTIQUES—Used Furniture.” A similar sign posted like a warning in the yard declared “LAMPERS,” which referred to the bald, bloodsucking eels that Phennel dug out of the mucky bends in Pink Creek. Lampers were high commodities, especially when she came into a bevy of blue lampers, considered the hottest summer

walleye bait at any price.

“So I hear.” The Reverend fidgeted on Russ’s forearm as they approached the sagging Victoria house.

“And Reverend Jim is come too. Why, do ya remember the first time ya brought that bird ’round here? That was a sorry sight.” Phennel shook her head, rocked a moment, then stopped and put her oversized spectacles on her face.

“Yup.” Russ paused at the porch steps. “Found him with a mangled foot, brought him to you, and you fixed him up.” The crow was left with one good foot and one stump, and when he walked he limped like a peg-leg pirate.

“Ya mean the Reverend Jim Chattanooga fixed him up. I only doctored him. It was the five dollars sent to Reverend Jim for a TV prayer that put the Lord’s healing in that bird. What ya got there, Mr. Smonig?” She knew, or should have known. He brought fillets every week. Maybe she didn’t want to seem like charity.

“Shad and walleye. I had extra and thought maybe you could use some. Only seems right, what with you paying that five dollars for that prayer.” Russ ducked under the hanging sign and stepped up on the porch. As he did so, the crow hopped onto Phennel’s shoulder and cawed in her bad ear.

“Why, that’s very thoughtful, Mr. Smonig. No roe yet, I suppose?” She looked up at him through her glasses, her wet sloe eyes searching his. Phennel was a sensitive, spiritual woman, and she could see pain in a person’s eyes.

“No, not yet. I’ll just put these in your icebox.” Russ made his way through the flimsy screen door and Phennel nodded her thanks. He returned shortly, conscious both of the sport waiting at his trail and of Phennel’s probing eyes. He tipped his hat, ready to mumble his good-bye. Miss Row interrupted.

“Ya missin’ Sandra pretty bad lately? If ya like, Russell, come by this evening for some Postum and we’ll talk.”

The name Sandra stung. Russ nodded at the offer of instant mock coffee, smiled weakly, and moved off to his truck without a word.

When he climbed in, he discovered that the Reverend had jimmied the glove box and flown off with his Pabst bottle opener.

Sid arose to the distant applause of the river and wandered into his knotty pine kitchen. In a dented saucepan he whipped up some instant coffee. Steaming mug in hand, he shuffled through the tackle strewn living room and kicked open the door to the porch. Squirrels exploded out of the rafters and dove for a gnaw hole in the porch screen. They were gone. Sid casually examined the leafy nest they fled as he settled into a PVC lawn chair.

The weather had been unsettled, overcast skies spotted with teasing peeks of blue and the stray rays of sun. It was frosty out and early in the season for any frog or insect to make much racket in the morning. Only the river, which was running a little high, kicked up a fuss. All in all it was about as quiet as it got at Ballard Cabin, which was just about perfect musical accompaniment for Sid's first morning alone in seven years. Piquant and piney country air filled his nose, an aroma he hoped would soon vanquish the lingering whiff of prison stench.

Everything had happened just as he'd mapped it out over the years. His lawyer, Endelpo, had hatched Sid's various nest eggs, sent him real estate clippings, cinched the deal on the cabin, and gotten him an LTD to replace his long-gone Marquis. Acknowledging that keeping Sid in New Jersey during probation might be a death sentence, Warden Lachfurst had been instrumental in negotiating parole that allowed Sid to relocate. Of course he had to keep in close contact with his probation officer, a man who by no coincidence was a "bronze back" enthusiast. His P.O. had accompanied him to his new digs, and after inspecting the river advised Sid that he didn't really expect him to seek employment so much as find him the smallmouth bass. No need for Sid to visit him in Newark. He would be back often enough, rod in hand. As would, in time, Warden Lachfurst. And maybe one or two trout-mad members of the parole board.

So in effect, Sid had cut a deal with the prosecutors for a short sentence, with the Camuchis eliminating anybody who would possibly come after him, and with the anglers on the parole board for the ability to relocate to a fishing outpost.

Ballard Cabin was a simple affair—bedroom, living room, kitchen, and screened porch facing toward the river, out over an embankment. The outside was shingled and painted brown, with fore-and-aft green trim. The inside was knotty pine adorned with paint-by-number oils, numerous floor lamps, and two resident examples of taxidermy—a pickerel and a deer head that tendered the eerily ingratiating leer of the Great Bear Transmission logo. The cabin was nestled under a stand of white pine, and from the embankment at the back porch, overgrown grass and saplings cluttered the sweep down to a stone

shoal and light rapids. Abutments from a washed-out bridge stood on each shore just downstream.

Sid sucked in the piney air and exhaled the prison stench. Now and again he took a sip of coffee and he admired the peaceful surroundings. But it wasn't long before he heard a truck drive up the road and turn down his neighbor's drive.

An Eldorado with a "Semper Fi" bumper sticker was waiting for Russ when he returned to his trailer. Russ marshaled his cheeriest demeanor and pulled up next to his visitor.

"How-do. I'm Russ Smonig. Ready to try for some shad?"

Russ hopped out of his truck toting the white breakfast bag. The iguana-like man leaning on the Eldorado stepped forward.

"I should say so! Been here twenty minutes. Was about ready to bug out. Don't know why you have a roll call so damned early if I was just going to come stand by this shed. And what's this about *trying* for shad? By golly, Smonig, if you can get shad for that partner of mine, you'll get shad for me."

Russ just kept smiling. "Now that's the spirit! Well, we're wasting time. The boat's all loaded down by the river."

The Iguana croaked, pushing up his sleeves. "Now hold it, Smonig. Seventy-five bucks for a haul a day, right?"

"That's right."

"From the time we hit the water, I assume?"

"O.K., yes, that's right." The cheery smile was withering.

"Well, let's get this thing organized first, d'ya mind? I got rods here an' I need to know which weapon to take. And ammo—I've got salmon flies. But if I run outta bullets I expect you to resupply me at no extra cost."

"Excuse me." Russ blinked. "You want to fly-fish for shad? It's really a little early in the season for that. The water's high. You'd need a full sink line and..."

"Smonig, you shoulda told me that over the phone...."

"Well, when your partner was here we used spinning tackle. I assumed you wanted to do the same."

"Smonig, I never, ever, use spinning tackle."

A squirrel small enough to fit in a coffee cup ventured forth from the nest in the porch rafters and spied on Sid for some time before drawing near.

Sid sipped his instant coffee, viewed the river, and kept an eye on the inquisitive young squirrel. At the same time he monitored the tone of garbled conversation from his next-door neighbor's, which was out of view beyond a stand of tall weeds, a serviceberry hedge, some bulrushes, and a lopsided willow. Fly reels whizzed and clattered, doors creaked and slammed, two men conversed in earnest. A long last the activity subsided.

As Sid tried to figure where the activity had gone, he felt a tentative twitching on the shoulder of his bathrobe. Whiskers brushed his graying sideburn and a rapid wuffling filled his ear. The pup squirrel was searching his ear for pine nuts.

Years of wariness, both in prison and the Newark rackets, had trained Sid to react slowly but no less definitively to prodding, whether the stimulus be the barrel of a 9 mm, a shiv, or a baby squirrel. He turned his head slowly toward the wee rodent, who grasped at his lobe in a vain effort to keep the ear from drifting away. But he was diverted by Sid's stare. The squirrel's huge black pupils stared back. He sniffed for a moment, put both forepaws on Sid's nose, and began to look up his nostrils.

"Cute lil' mother." Sid chuckled, just before two yellow incisors clamped on his nostril flange.

A zap of pain shot Sid to his feet. The pup squirrel vaulted for the rafters, where he chattered with warning from the confines of the leafy nest.

Sid held his nose, checked his fingers for blood, and looked up.

"You'n me have to have a little talk sometime." He squinted at the squirrel's nest. But the gurgling snare of a distant outboard motor snatched his attention.

Clawing through the pile of gear in the living room, Sid came up with trout-spotting binoculars and charged out the front door just as fast as his bedroom slippers would take him. With the agility of a kid scaling a fence, he hopped onto the portico's wood rail, got a leg up onto the roof of the cabin, and scrambled on all fours to the limb of a white pine. Making his way along the limb to the trunk, Sid drew his red satin robe against the elements, tightened his sash, and trained the binoculars on a boat motoring down the rapids.

The well-placed mole on Sid's cheek vanished in the grin that worked up one side of his face, a row of even wrinkles blending into his nicely pleated crow's-feet.

A guy in a brown fedora stood at the stern working the boat backward through the rapids with practiced skill. Another guy stood in the bow waving his arms and pointing at the river.

The outboard was silenced. On the river's far side, Captain Fedora draped a claw anchor over the side and fed it rope. Line taut, the boat swung around smartly in the heavy current, putting the boat downstream. In what appeared to be a demonstration for a pupil, Captain Fedora stood and began fall casting in luxurious brown loops that finally unfurled his fly forward and across the current. After letting it drift down current, he reeled up and sat back down.

The pupil stood and prepared by slowly pulling line from his reel and looping it neatly in one hand. Captain Fedora cringed as his pupil's fly zipped closer and closer to his head. But he didn't interrupt. Pupil, who finally let loose a noodly cross-stream cast. This was repeated for about twenty minutes. Nothing. Pupil started pointing fingers at Captain Fedora just as the latter weighed anchor and moved the boat fifteen feet farther downstream.

Pupil shrugged and looked as if he wished he could hail a cab. But after some fussing and finger-pointing, he got another cast out.

When his line snapped taut from the water, Pupil stumbled in surprise. Captain Fedora grabbed him by the jacket to steady him.

Silver arced like a shard of glass from the water in a high, shimmering leap of fish. Pupil fumbled then reeled up his slack line. The fish was gone.

"Whoa." Sid tugged thoughtfully at his ear. Except for a flounder outing off Sea Girt, New Jersey, Sid had never seen a fish caught, much less jump. His buddies referred to fluke as "doormats" for obvious reasons. Sid had dragged in his share of doormats that day, and some had fallen off the hook too. But here was a jumping, rocketlike fish—whatever it was—and it had gotten away.

"Huh," Sid muttered, bolstering his morale. "That rocket-fish had been my fish? It'd be in the boat." Sid's own bravado made him a little uncomfortable. As he adjusted his footing, he noticed something twinkling in the deep crease where the branch and trunk met. Crouching, he brushed away some needles, uncovering a handful of coins, jigs, paper clips, keys, buttons, and a Pabst bottle opener. He stood, shrugged off his mild curiosity, and retrained his binoculars on the river.

An hour went by as the pupil hooked and lost one rocket-fish after the other. As soon as a fish was hooked, it blasted about thirty feet upstream and launched right out of the water, throwing the lure. Captain Fedora tried to make a few suggestions, but apparently Pupil didn't care to be taught.

Eventually, a fish was soundly hooked, played, netted, and boated. Pupil sat down and pointed toward shore. Captain Fedora shrugged and hauled up the anchor. The boat wended neatly through the rapids and disappeared from Sid's view. And high time. His shoulders and feet were worse for wear from the rough pine bark. Sid's carpet slippers and satin bathrobe weren't exactly lumberjack gear.

He was startled by the sigh of air brakes behind him. He turned to see the Red Eft Trout Farms truck lumbering down his driveway.

"Hey, neighbor. What ya doin' up in that tree in your bathrobe?" A woman hollered from the cab as she brought the truck to a stop in front of Ballard Cabin. She jumped down from the cab. "Ya didn't sleep up there, did ya? What are ya? An airline pilot? Ya like sleepin' as close to the clouds as possible?"

Sid blinked and set his jaw. She was wearing crimson hiking boots.

"Yeah? And who the fuck are you?"

“Nice mouth, neighbor!” She jerked a thumb back at the tanker truck and snapped her bubble gum.
“Red Eft Trout Farms. I’m Jenny. Here to stock your pond.”

“I don’t got no pond.” With the confidence of an alley cat, Sid made his way from the limb to the roof and made for the portico.

“Sure ya do. What, didn’t them real estate folks show ya the pond? Nobody told ya ’bout the pond?” Jenny walked up to the portico where Sid was brushing pine needles from his robe. He found the sap sticking to his fingers. Sap.

“O.K., so if there’s a pond, where is it?” He gestured broadly to his front yard, then rubbed his hands together to shoo away the pine needles. He only succeeded in rearranging them.

Five minutes later, Sid was still in his bathrobe but sporting hip boots. Rubbing a paper towel over the sap on his fingers, he followed Jenny into the tall weeds and serviceberry thicket. A few paces in, Jenny stopped.

“See? Now, do ya want trout in it or not?”

Weeds and hedge, left unchecked, had conspired to obscure the long, narrow pond from view. A rapidly flowing, skinny creek merrily winding its way to the Delaware met an elfin earthen dam at the edge of the embankment. Outflow coursed through a pipe embedded in the dam, which doubled as a bridge. Sid estimated Ballard Pond to be four times the size of a bocci ball court.

The prospect of owning a pond thrilled Sid almost as much as the prospect of Jenny’s red hiker boots, but you wouldn’t have known it to look at him.

“You call that a pond?” He finally balled up the tattered paper towel and stuffed it in his robe pocket, his hands flecked with paper towel.

“The Ballards did. And every year they had the farm come out and chuck in fifty twelve-inch brook trout. So whaddaya say, sport? Want your own lil’ trout pond?”

“Could be there’s still some trout left from last year.”

“Don’t think so, sport. Ballard died last spring, just after stocking. Kids were in all last summer catching ’em any way they could.” Jenny pushed past Sid, making for her truck.

She just had the truck door open when she heard: “How much?”

Jenny turned and handed him the pink invoice. Sid produced a wad of bills from his bathrobe pocket.

* * *

“Damn, Smonig—that was some real frontline fishing. How much you think this roe shad weighs?” The Iguana was tromping in Russ’s wake through the high grass and toward the trailer. Hanging from

his stringer was a shad that looked like a large startled herring.

“Four, maybe going on five,” Russ lied. “Definitely the best one you had on.” Roe shad were commonly four to six pounds; buck shad rarely broke four pounds. The bloody critter the sport had bagged was just a bit better than three.

The Iguana was quite pleased with his trophy, though, and when they reached the car and he had all his stuff packed up, he handed Russ the borrowed reel along with the seventy-five-dollar fee. And that was that. For a sport so well pleased, a tip is usual, but Russ was just glad they didn’t haggle over the fact that they’d only been on the water two and a half hours, even though it was the Iguana who insisted they head in after he had his fish.

As soon as the Eldorado and “Semper Fi” disappeared up the drive, Russ stopped waving bye-bye and turned toward his trailer. It was Friday, Russ had his seventy-five bucks, and before you knew it, it would be Saturday night, when he would head over to the Duck Pond Bar for a beery respite. In the meantime, Russ’s choice of activities included finishing an article for *Fly-Fishing Gazette*, a complimentary tackle store rag for which he was compensated with a free three-line ad for his guiding services. Or he could tie a bunch of early season flies for the local tackle shop, a labor-intensive undertaking that netted him a whopping five dollars an hour. Or he could attempt to exorcise the demon from the International’s ignition, potentially making money by avoiding giving it to the mechanic.

A truck’s backup beep sounded from behind the willow. The crunch of weeds and the snap of twigs followed. The seventy-five dollars tucked in his back pocket, Russ decided to see what was up on the other side of the hedge. He veered from the trailer, went past the barbecue pit, and came to a stop next to the willow at the edge of Ballard Pond.

The serviceberry bushes parted, tiny white petals from their flowers snowing onto the red satiny bathrobe of the guy in hip boots coming into view. Beyond him, red round taillights approached.

“Hold it,” Sid barked, and the taillights went bright. The back tires of the truck were beginning to make ruts in the mud. The beeper stopped, the air brakes sneezed. Jenny came around the other side of the truck.

“Yeah, that’s close enough.” Jenny disappeared for a second, then reappeared with a long-handle net. She scaled a ladder on the back of the truck to the top, where she opened a tank lid.

“O.K., sport, here’s how we’ll count ’em. I pull up a net full—usually five fish—then I say ‘five,’ you hold it down for ya to check, then chuck the fish into the pond, O.K.?”

“Let’s get somethin’ straight, you an’ me. I’m no sport. You call me Sid, got it? Second, you’re not chucking anything. There’s a bucket on the side of the truck. I fill it with water, you *place* my fish into the bucket of water, and I will put my fish *gently* into the pond. Got it?”

Jenny grinned. “Whatever ya say, sport. Uh, Sid. And ya can just keep calling me ‘lady,’ thank ya very much.” She already had the net down in the tank. Sid grabbed the bucket and filled it with water from the pond.

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