

DIARY OF A WITNESS

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Alfred A. Knopf
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Thanks, as always, to Vance and Suzanne for being my trusted (and honest) “first readers.” Special thanks to Diane Stevens, whose feedback helped shape the early trajectory of Ernie and Will’s story. And a very special thanks to my friend Jenny for teaching me how to fish.

In memory of Lenny Horowitz,
my high school English teacher.
One caring person can turn the tide.
And you did.

Will Manson stood up for me today. Against the jocks. Stupid. Nice, but stupid. I wish he wouldn't do stuff like that. It's so wrong. Will's my best friend, though.

Oh, who am I kidding? He's my only friend.

It was gym class, which has got to be the worst of an already bad situation. But I'm pret used to it. More or less. As much as you get used to a thing like that. I'd just gotten out of the shower, and I was walking back to my corner to get dressed. As fast as I safely could. doesn't pay to go too fast. It draws them. Like when dogs see a cat running away It brings o the worst in them.

I got snapped with a towel from behind. Right on the butt. It hurt, but I kept that myself. It almost knocked off the towel I was wearing, but I grabbed it and held tight. Laughter from the rear, then some comments about laying off the Ho Hos and Twinkies. Nothing I don't hear pretty much every day of my life.

Then I heard Will's voice. He said, "Why don't you leave him alone?"

Really stupid. I was almost to my corner. Then it would have been over anyway. All he was doing was pouring Zippo lighter fluid on the fire. Still, you have to like him for stuff like that. In a weird sort of way.

By the time I looked around, the jocks had him by the throat with his back up against the wall. The usual suspects. There were five of them. I'm not even sure I know all their names. I'm pretty sure there's a Mike and a Dave in there somewhere. Then again, you can't throw a rock into a group of guys without hitting a Mike or a Dave. And you know what? They're cowards. Know how I know? Because they always attack in a pack, like a bunch of coyotes. Only cowards would be sure to outnumber their help-less victim by five to one.

Will isn't fat. But he catches it all the same. I think it's partly being new. Also smart doesn't help. Plus usually when he opens his mouth, something geeky will fall out. He's skinny, too skinny, and has big ears that stick out away from his head. And the worst acne ever. Sometimes it hurts to look at him. But I do anyway. I'm no picnic, either, so I still do. I think if his skin cleared up and he got his ears pinned by a plastic surgeon, he might be okay. If he never once talked.

The chief coward was talking so close to Will's face that you could see Will blink because he was getting spit on. "And what'll you do if we don't, huh, Charlie? Tell your mother? Or that's right. You don't *have* one."

I'll say this for Will. He didn't go at them. I could see how easy it would have been. I could see it on his face. I was thinking, Fight the urge. Be calm. I mean, what good does it do to charge five big jocks? They could just beat you to a pulp and walk away laughing.

I watched Will's face, and it just got redder and redder.

Will moved here from L.A. with his father at the beginning of the school year because his mother left them for some guy. We hit it off right away, because we have three big things in common. We each only have one parent. We each really like to fish. Even though his fishing and my fishing are pretty different things. And, most important, neither one of us has ever

one other person who wants to be our friend.

He doesn't talk much about his mother. The one time it came up, he just said what he always says about home: "That's life in the Manson family." Will thinks he was shot down before he was even born, because it's so hard to grow up with the name of a famous murderer. I think maybe he's being too dramatic. But I'm not sure he's entirely wrong. He takes a lot of crap for it. That's why they call him Charlie. That should be the worst thing they ever call us.

But you'd think they'd leave you alone about a thing like your mother. I mean, *your mother*. Damn. Something's got to be sacred. Instead they attack you on just that front. Like they have to call you a space alien for having that happen to you. Otherwise a thing like that could happen to them, too.

It's a theory, anyway. I'm full of theories about the popular guys. I'll never know if I'm right, though, because I'll never be one of them.

Poor Will. I never saw anybody get that red. The guy who was holding him called him Lobster Boy, and they all walked away laughing.

I got dressed fast, and Will and I walked out into the hall together. I always breathe when I get out into the hall. Like I'm breathing for the first time ever. Not that I haven't been tortured in the hall, but gym is worse.

I said, "Why do you do stuff like that, Will?"

He said, "You're welcome."

"Yeah, okay. It's nice and all. But it just makes it worse." The trick is to get small. Never look in their eyes. Never look at them at all. Just look down at the ground and try to get so small you're hardly even there. That's the only thing that helps. Except when it doesn't.

"You're right," he said. "You raise an interesting point, young Ernie." That was a line I've heard in a TV movie. We've been using it ever since. "If I really wanted to help you, I could figure a way to get you out of gym altogether. And I might have just the thing."

"I'm not going to maim myself. If that's what you mean."

While we walked, I did the usual routine where I found lots of reasons to turn my head. When we passed a locker with stickers on it, I turned to read them. If a pretty girl walked by the other way, I followed her with my eyes until my head was almost all the way around. Purposeful. Not that I don't like pretty girls, but it's not in me to stare. I was watching our backs. Making sure nobody was bearing down from the rear. But you can't just keep glancing nervously over your shoulder. Not unless you have a death wish. That's like the equivalent of bleeding into the water if you're a fish. You become this living, breathing advertisement for shark repellent.

"I knew a guy in L.A. who got a pass from gym. All he had to do was tell the guidance counselor a heartfelt story of grief."

"He just told him he was suffering in there?" Nothing is that easy. Right?

"No, he told him he was gay."

"I'm not gay."

“Neither was this guy. But he said he was. And that he was so scared because he thought every time he cut his eyes away, the other boys would know. Very sad story.”

“They didn’t make him go to counseling or anything?”

“No way, Jose. They can’t do that. It’s discrimination. He wasn’t mentally ill. He was gay. Be proud, Ernie. You are a proud, well-adjusted young gay man. You just can’t hack dressing with the boys. They’ll pretend to understand, but really they’re so paranoid they don’t want you dressing with the other boys, either.”

“Wow. I don’t know.” My brain was spinning around. How come when something really hurts, the only solutions hurt just as bad? “I’m not sure which is worse. Gym class or telling the guidance counselor I’m gay.”

“Tough choices. Indeed.” Will talks like that. Actually says things like indeed. “But consider this. Gym class is every day. You only have to tell this story once.”

He had a point there. “I’ll sleep on it,” I said.

“Get Mrs. Menendez. She’s sympathetic. Besides, I have a lot in common with Mrs. Menendez.”

“Name one thing.”

Will rolled his eyes at me. Sometimes he just couldn’t believe I was so stupid. His idea of stupid was anybody who couldn’t follow his twisted train of thought. “Alex, I’ll take Famous Murderers for five hundred. Answer: the Menendez brothers. Question: Who are the two affluent young men who murdered their parents in cold blood with a shotgun?”

I shook my head. “You have murderers on the brain.”

“Alas,” he said. That’s another thing he actually said. Alas. “My legacy.”

Then we made a sharp right into biology lab. Without incident. We actually made it from the gym to the biology lab without incident. Red-letter day.

Now I seriously have to sleep on this Mrs. Menendez thing. That’s got to be a weird thing to sleep on. I can just see myself tossing and turning a lot tonight.

Mrs. Menendez sat back in her chair and sighed. Her fingers were in that steeple mode. wonder why people do that. They act like it helps them think or something. Like their brain is in their fingers.

“I understand this is a very tough issue for you, Ernie.” I got the sense that this whole thing involved practice. The serious look of pity. The understanding. Like an actor who can do a part without even much thinking. “But I really hate to see you miss out on physical education entirely. P.E. is so important.”

“Especially for me, right?”

She shot me a hurt look. I bet she practiced that, too. “Now, Ernie, you know I didn’t say that.”

No, but you were thinking it. But I didn’t say that. I just stuck with the no. I just said, “No. You didn’t.” But you were thinking it.

“Maybe we can work something else out.”

“Like what?” This was already taking a bad turn. She should be writing out my pass book now.

“Maybe Mr. Bayliss will let you use the gym during lunch hour, or after school. Tell you what. I’ll write him a note, and you take it to him right now. And then the two of you can talk about what to do.”

“I don’t want Mr. Bayliss to know about this!”

“Well, how can we excuse you from P.E. without telling him? Let him help you, Ernie. You have to be willing to let people help you.”

Why did I let Will talk me into this? I should’ve known this would turn into a major disaster. See, this is the problem with small-town living. You keep running into people who actually care. It’s so irritating.

While I was feeling sorry for myself, she was writing out the note.

“Thanks,” I said, and stuck it in my jacket pocket. Where I knew it would stay. Maybe forever. Or maybe when I got home I would burn it.

I showed up to gym class fifth period as usual. I knew I was in deep doo-doo when I heard Mr. Bayliss say, “Ernie Boyd? Anybody seen Ernie Boyd?” I was thinking about running away. Skipping entirely. Maybe even leaving school. Then I saw his head sticking around the corner. He had this really thick sandy hair that was cut so short it stuck straight up on top. made him look like a scrub brush, only upside down. “Ah, there you are, Ernie. You have some kind of note you were supposed to show me?”

I could hear my heart pounding. I knew the panic on my face would give me away. “Um. No.”

He cocked his head over to one side. “No? Mrs. Menendez said she wrote you a note.”

bring me.”

“Oh. *That* note. Yes.”

“You still have it?”

“Uh. No.”

“Well then, how about if I call her and get her down here for a little conference?”

“Uh. No. You know what? I think I *do* remember where I put that note.”

“My office,” he said. And then the scrub brush disappeared.

Mr. Bayliss had shelves full of trophies lining the walls of his office. Must have been from sports teams in the old days. All this year’s sports teams bite.

I just sat there feeling about an inch tall while he read the note. I also felt kind of sick in my stomach. But maybe that was a good thing. Maybe if I threw up in his office, he’d forgive all about the note. But it wasn’t really bad enough. It wouldn’t turn into throwing up, but it wouldn’t go away.

He set down the note and looked right at me. I looked at my shoes.

“Ernie,” he said. It wasn’t good the way he said it. “You’re not gay.”

“You don’t know that. How can you know what’s inside of me?”

“Ernie, Ernie, Ernie. Just last week I heard you talking about Amy McPhee and how beautiful she is. The week before that, you came in here with a Victoria’s Secret catalog in your gym bag.”

How humiliating. “I didn’t know you saw that.” That was a bad answer. I should have said I was in denial, or putting up a brave front. This was just getting worse and worse. I wouldn’t have given anything to start this morning all over.

“I know why you want to get out of gym class,” he said. “It’s no more embarrassing than being gay. I would think you’d’ve told the truth. The truth is no harder.”

“Oh yes, sir. Yes it is, too. The truth is always harder. Because it’s the truth.”

Mr. Bayliss sat back and sighed. And put his fingers in that steeple mode. I kid you not. They must all rehearse together. They must cover this stuff in teacher school. “Make your deal,” he said.

I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like this deal.

He pointed to the shower in the corner of his office. His own private shower. “See the shower? That’s your shower for the rest of the year. And this is your dressing room.”

I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t hate the deal. He was helping me. They never actually help you. It was amazing. “Cool. Thanks.”

“Here’s what you have to do for me, though.”

Oh. Should’ve known. That was way too good to be true.

He pointed to the full-length mirror across from the shower. “See that mirror?”

“Yeah ...” Did he think I was blind or something?

“And that scale next to it?”

Uh-oh. This was getting ugly. The scale was one of those vicious doctor’s office things with the weights that slide over, so you see the answer right in front of your nose. “Okay. What about it?”

“When you get out of the shower, I want you to stand in front of that mirror and look at yourself. And then get on the scale.”

I could feel myself getting dizzy. My heart was pounding in my ears, and it was like all these silent voices were screaming at me to get away. Just start running and never stop. Like I could really do that even if I tried. I don’t think I said anything at all.

“Look, I’m not trying to shame you,” he said. “That’s why I’m giving you your privacy. I don’t want you to be ridiculed. And I’m not saying you should ridicule yourself. I just want you to keep your eyes open. Look the problem head-on. I don’t want to help you be in denial about it.”

I just kept looking at my shoes.

I never look in full-length mirrors. Never. If I catch a glimpse of myself in a store window I quickly look away again. We don’t even have full-length mirrors at our house. My mother doesn’t want them, and neither do I.

“Ernie. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes, sir.” It was better than showering and dressing with the other guys. Besides, if I didn’t look, and I didn’t weigh, he would never know.

“Okay, good. I’ll clear out now. See you in the gym in less than five.”

I started to get undressed. I was thinking this wasn’t such a bad deal. Then I looked up, and there was the mirror. You couldn’t miss it. You couldn’t help but look. At first I sort of held my arms in front of my middle, but then I just dropped my arms and stood there.

Then I got on the scale.

Don’t ask me what came over me. But there was nobody there but me. Better to find out in private than at the doctor’s. I might as well see how bad it really was.

About 200, I was thinking. If Mr. Bayliss had asked me how bad I thought it had gotten, I would have said around 200. I tapped the little weights into place: 242. I was officially more than 100 pounds overweight.

I sat down on the scale for a few minutes, and then I got up and put on my sweatpants and T-shirt. And joined the other guys in the gym. They were playing dodgeball. Ah, geez. Anything but dodgeball. There should be a law against that game. It’s like legal torture.

Will looked surprised to see me, but I just kept avoiding his eyes.

This guy named Alex and this other guy named Kenny had gym class with us, fifth period. And even though Will and I weren’t exactly friends with them, we had a certain amount in common. That is, they weren’t exactly jocks, either. Not quite the “it” crowd. So I could sense the four of us trying to look out for each other throughout the regrettably legal viciousness that is dodgeball. Trying to have each other’s backs. Kind of a professional courtesy.

All through the game I was thinking I’d have to do something. This had gone far enough.

It'd be hard, because I couldn't tell my mother I was going on a diet. She's bigger than me. There's just no way I can say a thing like that without making her feel bad about herself. Without hurting her feelings. Maybe I could say my appetite was off and I didn't even know why.

After dodgeball Will came up to me. "It didn't work?"

"Not exactly. I didn't get a pass. But I do get to shower and change in Mr. Bayliss's office."

"Good deal. Problem solved."

I knew I had a bigger problem than that, though. Thanks to Mr. Bayliss, I was looking head-on.

When I got home, my mom was standing at the stove. Stirring with a wooden spoon in the big pasta pot.

"Your nose does not deceive you," she said. "I made your favorite dinner."

Fettuccine Alfredo. She makes the noodles from scratch. It's the best, most wicked, most addictive thing anybody has ever eaten. My father used to call it death on a plate. The sauce is made out of half a cup of butter, a whole cup of heavy cream, and a whole cup of Parmesan cheese. I don't even want to think about how many calories it has. Well, you don't. That's the thing. You don't think about it. When you eat fettuccine Alfredo, it means you give up, you don't care about the calories. It's like when you've been flailing around in the water trying to get someone to rescue you, but then you give up and just sink. You stop caring and sink.

I sank hard today. I ate two plates full. Once I got started, I couldn't stop eating. I just stopped caring.

Will was standing in front of his locker when I came down the hall this morning. Standing there with his locker door wide open. It's like he was just begging someone to come shove him in and slam the door. I couldn't think what could be so important that he would forget basic safety.

He said, "What's the best news you can possibly think of?"

"Um. Let me see. Amy McPhee wants to go out with me."

"In your dreams, buddy, but this is close. I finally talked my dad into taking us fishing on Saturday."

"Oh. Cool." I was actually a little bit afraid of the ocean. But I was willing to give it a go.

Will and I had a deal, right since we met at the beginning of the school year. He was going to take me out on the ocean and show me fishing his way, and I was going to take him up to my uncle Max's cabin and show him fishing my way.

His way you're out on a twelve-foot metal boat, swaying with the tide, using this tackle where the hooks are like the size of your hand. Where the line is twenty-five-or thirty-pound test, and you're wrestling these big sea monsters up out of the deep. Having to use a net or gaffing hook just to get them up into the boat without breaking the line.

My way you're perched at the side of this running creek, with four-pound test and a pole that swishes back and forth at the tip when you move it. Waiting for that special little stutt that says trout. Then reeling in, watching the silver of its belly crisscross through the water before it breaks the surface in one final jump for freedom. If you know your stuff you never even need to get your feet wet.

I think I like my kind best, but he swears once I get used to pulling in the big ones, I never go back. I'll get spoiled and I'll never want to fish for twelve-inch trout again.

That's actually what I'm worried about. I'm worried he might be right.

He also likes hunting, but I don't think I'm up for that.

About a second later the jocks cruised by, and Will quick closed the locker before he could get shoved into it. So he hadn't entirely lost his mind.

Just as they got level with us, all five of them did one of those fish imitations. You know the kind with your hands up by your face like gills, and your mouth going in a little O. In perfect unison. Almost as though they knew what we'd been talking about. I mean, someone seeing it from the outside might think so. But really, they did this to us almost every day.

Just a run-of-the-mill school of jockfish going by. Taking the opportunity to rag on us as they passed. They thought fishing was hilarious. And that we were total dorks for liking it. Why Will ever talked about fishing out loud in class, I'll never know.

I guess he thinks fishing is cool. Him and just about nobody else.

I heard their laughter echoing back to us all the way down the hall. Even after they turned the corner, I could still hear them laughing.

We sat in the cafeteria, daydreaming. Out loud. To each other.

“My dream,” he said, “is to live in a world where Lisa Muller would give me the time of day.”

“Dream on,” I said. “Besides, she’s no Amy McPhee.”

“Amy McPhee is beautiful in an obvious sort of way.”

I laughed at him, then sucked some milk out of a straw, then laughed at him again. “There is nothing wrong with obvious beauty.”

“Maybe not, but still.”

Just then somebody passing behind me bonked me on the back of the head with their tray. Hard. I figured it was an accident until I heard somebody laughing. I looked around. It wasn't even the usual suspects. Total strangers, probably seniors. Senseless drive-by cruelty.

The only one who seemed to notice was this girl named Jane, who was sitting with us at the Safety Table. Plain Jane, the cruel ones called her. Sort of in the Kenny and Althea category. She rolled her eyes as a professional courtesy.

“I don't even mean give me the time of day, as in date me,” Will said, going on like total strangers hadn't just needlessly assaulted me. I think he was so deep inside his own head that he didn't even see. “I know that's asking too much. I mean literally give me the time of day. Well, no, not literally. I don't mean I'd ask her what time it is. I mean literally just the kind of time you give a stranger. Like I'd say something funny and she'd laugh. She has the greatest laugh. Or even if she just smiled at me. That would be enough. You see, my young Ernie? My goals are realistic. My goals are modest.”

I just shook my head at him. I finished my milk, and the straw made a rude sucking sound.

I looked at Lisa. Needless to say, she was not looking at us. She was talking to her friend and to one of the jocks. Either Mike or Dave. Or maybe his name was Rusty. They all kind of mush together in my head. She had long dark hair and dark eyes and a nose that was a little too big. But she was pretty. Will was right about that. Not in the most obvious way. Not like a Hollywood starlet. Not like the curvy blonde you throw at a guy when you want him to say “Oooh” without even thinking. This was something a little more real. She might actually have been real.

“That's it,” he said. “I've made up my mind.”

“What mind?” I said. But just kidding, not really being mean. You can talk like that when your friends know they're friends.

He ignored me. “I've just made a resolution. Someday I will go up to Lisa Muller and say something to make her laugh.” He stared off in her direction and sighed. “It's resolved.”

Just as he said that, she stood up from her table and picked up her tray.

“Go, tiger,” I said.

He just sat. “I have to think of something funny first.”

“Right. I get it.”

“Besides, I said someday. I definitely did not say today.”

A day like yesterday is why Uncle Max gave me this journal. I know it is. I think he figured the little stuff is important, too, but this is the kind of thing you'd put in a journal even if you never had one before. I couldn't even bring myself to write about this yesterday. It was just too long a day and I was too tired and confused. Too upset.

But now it's early Sunday morning and I'm waiting for Uncle Max to drive down from Lemoore to help me with this fish. And I know he's going to ask if I wrote it all out in my journal. I want to be able to say yes. I want to say, I did it just like you told me. Remembering everything everybody said, and putting it down. Also how I felt and what I saw. Like I was writing out a story. So a total stranger could read it and really get what happened.

"But I'll never show it to a total stranger." That's what I said at the time.

He said that's not why. He said it was because later, when I'm a grown-up, I'll look back on it, and I'll be so far removed I'll need all those details to help bring it back. *I'll* be the stranger.

Uncle Max is a writer, and I think he has it in his head that I'll grow up to be one, too. I'm not sure I'm good enough for that. But I'm willing to try what he says.

Anyway, here goes:

We got all the way to the coast, and I found out that Will's father wasn't actually going on the boat with us. Just me and Will and Sam, Will's little brother. It seemed scarier without a grown-up. I don't know why, really. Grown-ups do stuff wrong all the time. Still. I didn't figure it would just be us.

"I've been out on this boat without my father, like, twenty times."

"Yeah, and he still hasn't caught a legal ling," his father said.

We were standing on the boat ramp, right where it met the sand. This steep concrete ramp with deep ridges, so the trucks can always get traction.

"This'll be the time," Will said. "Besides, I've caught plenty of lings."

"Yeah, plenty of shorts."

"I caught a legal one."

"Hooked a legal one. It's not caught till you get it on the boat."

"Yeah, yeah."

I was too embarrassed to admit I didn't know what a ling is.

All four of us picked up the boat by the stern end. Lifted it off the trailer and set it on the sand. Then Will and his father took the bow end and put that down on the sand, too. Then we all turned it around and pushed it down to the waterline, across this stuff that was more like pebbles than white sand.

"Six hours," his father said. "Keep an eye on your watch. I want this thing landed when

back down the ramp again in six hours.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Will said.

I got in the front, the seat right behind the bow. Like a metal bench across the narrowest part. Not too comfortable. The waves looked big to me. But I guess I’m not used to judging waves. Sam got in the middle, and Will sat on the stern end, where he could work the outboard motor.

“Ready?” his father asked. He was standing right behind the boat, waiting for a big wave to come along and lift it up a little. He was wearing big rubber boots that came up to his knees. “This one,” he said. When it came in, I felt the boat slide sideways. He gave us a big push and Will grabbed up the oars and rowed like crazy. “Six hours. Don’t let me down.”

Will’s father walked up the pebble-sand to his truck and drove up the ramp and down the road. Meanwhile, Will kept rowing, until we were out beyond the waves. I looked out to the horizon, and a big wave crashed into the bow and caught me in the face. It got my sneaker wet, too. Sam laughed at me. Will told him to shut up.

Will put down the oars and started the motor. Pulling a string, like on a lawn mower engine. He had to do it three or four times. But then it started up, and we went roaring off in the direction of the kelp beds.

“What does he do for six hours while we fish?” I asked Will. I had to yell to be heard over the motor.

“He either goes to the West End bar and plays darts or he goes over to Camozzi’s and plays pool.”

I could see one other little fishing boat sitting out by the kelp beds, and two or three kayaks. I already felt a little seasick bobbing up over the swells.

After a while Will cut the engine and the boat drifted to a stop in front of the kelp.

Will said, “We’ll try here because it’s good fishing by the kelp beds. But there might be drift, so be careful. Really watch your line and the kelp. If you get hung up, half the time you have to cut the line to get it back. Then you lose your leader and your jig. Gets expensive. And look behind you to see if the boat is drifting into the kelp, too.”

Sam was tying up his rig. Tying on a swivel and then hooking up a leader that had two big hooks on it, tied up with bright red artificial feathers. I watched him to get the idea of the rig. He looked up and saw me looking. “Thought your dopey friend here already knew how to fish.”

Will reached out and knocked Sam in the head. “He’s a trout fisherman. Show some respect.”

“Ow.” Sam went back to tying up, almost like nothing had ever happened. He put a big spoon-shaped jig with a giant treble hook at the end of the leader.

I’d met Will’s brother, Sam, once before. I didn’t like him. I guess Will didn’t, either. He was about twelve. Or maybe eleven, I don’t know. And he wasn’t an outcast like us. And he wasn’t afraid to show off about that.

I tied up the way they did, pulling gear out of Will’s tackle box. I could hear the wire whistle, and I watched it flip over bits of kelp sitting on the very top of the water. I looked

out to the horizon and saw great blue herons perched on top of the kelp on their long legs which seemed so weird. Who would've thought it would hold them?

Will handed me a wooden board with frozen squid on it, and a knife. "Put a squid head on your treble hook. Just on one hook. Go in right between the eyes. It stays on better that way. And then cut some small pieces of the tubes to go on your shrimp jig hooks. Higher up."

"But it's frozen solid," I said.

"Doesn't matter. Just break off a head. It'll thaw fast enough in the water. And keep your thumb on the spool when you're unreeling," Will said. "Or the reel will get spinning too fast and you'll have a rat's nest of line to deal with."

I looked down at my pole and at the line. The whole thing looked like something from the land of the giants.

We just sat there for a while, watching our reels as they spooled out. Then I felt my jig hit the bottom.

"Come up three or four cranks off the bottom," Will said, and I did. "Otherwise you'll get snared up."

"Gets expensive," I said.

"Righto," he said. Will actually said things like righto. It's just who he was.

We sat for a while, and I noticed that they popped the tips of their poles up and down now and then, so I did, too.

Will said, "This is my lingcod day. I can feel it."

Sam blew a raspberry. "You'll never get a legal ling. Never. You've got the lingcod curse. He'll either be short, or he'll break the line, or he'll twist off the hook. You've always been cursed for lingcod. What makes you think today will be different?"

"You watch," Will said. "You watch how it'll be different."

We sat without talking awhile longer, and I tried not to think about the motion of the boat on the swells. The swells were so big. We could actually feel the boat roll into the valleys after each one. I was scared a big one might break right over the side of the boat. But none did. I was even more afraid to throw up in front of Sam.

Then I saw the tip of Sam's rod stutter, and he yelled out, "First fish!"

"Damn," Will said. "Sam always gets first fish."

He reeled it up and plopped it into the boat at my feet, where it flopped around on my sneakers. It was golden brown, with thick, jagged stripes that were almost flesh-colored, and it had bugged-out eyes.

"It's just a little gopher rockfish," Will said. Like he felt better now.

"It's still first fish."

Not five minutes later Sam reeled in his twin.

"We're moving," Will said.

"But I'm doing good here!" Sam whined back.

"We're moving." And he fired up the engine and veered us over closer to the big rocks.

sitting out in the middle of nowhere. "This is a better spot," he said when he'd cut the engine and turned the boat to slow it down. "This is where I caught that big ling, right off this rock."

"Hooked it, you mean," Sam said. "If you don't get it up on the boat, you didn't catch it."

"Yeah, yeah."

I've always hated being an only child. I always thought a brother would be the best thing. But, listening to them, I started thinking I might be wrong.

We dropped our jigs in and spooled down. Just sat like that awhile, popping our poles up and down. Then I saw Will pull up on his, but it didn't come up. It just stopped. It just got stuck and wouldn't come up.

"Ha-ha," Sam said. "Will's stuck on the bottom. Great spot to fish all right, Will."

Then the next thing we knew, the tip of Will's rod came down so hard it was curved almost into the water. Like it was trying to get under the boat.

"That ain't the bottom," Will said. His voice was all full of panic, but thrilled, too. "That's a ling."

"How do you know?" I asked.

Sam said, "Loosen the drag, or he'll break the line."

Will said, "I know it! I know how to fish, idiot."

I said, "How do you know it's a ling?"

Sam said, "A ling always feels like you caught the bottom. At first."

Will's face was set hard, and I could tell he was really working to get that fish up. I could see. Now and then the fish would pull back suddenly, and I could hear the zipping sound of four or five feet of line being pulled back off the reel.

Sam said, "You loosened the drag too much."

Will said, "Shut up, idiot. He's coming up."

I looked over the starboard side of the boat, and he was coming up. I saw him. He was huge. Maybe almost as long as the boat was wide, at least my part of the boat. When he got higher up and I really saw what he looked like, I was shocked. No, more than shocked. Scared. "What the hell is that?" I yelled.

Will said, "It's a lingcod, what does it look like?"

I didn't say so, but I was thinking it looked like the devil. It was dark, dark green, with mottled sides and a fin all down its long back that made it look like a dragon. And eyes that slanted in toward each other and looked so fierce it was more like a monster than a fish. And it came up with its mouth open, and it had teeth. Actual sharp, pointy teeth. It was like pure evil, only with fins.

"Sam!" Will yelled. "The net. Get the net."

Sam jumped for the net, but the long handle was caught under the big loops of the boat's towrope. He dove down to the boat's floor and tried to get it untangled.

Will yelled, "If you make me lose this fish, Sam—"

"Swim it back and forth! Don't let the line slack!"

“I know how to fish, idiot!”

I heard that sound again, of line being pulled out from the spool. “Damn,” Will said. “He’s pulling the boat closer to the kelp. Damn. Damn! Get that damn net, Sam. He’s going to get tied up in the kelp. Oh, damn! Damn it. He’s in the kelp. He’s all wrapped up in the kelp.” I saw Will adjust the drag again. Tighten it this time. He reeled in slowly, and the boat moved over a little closer to the fish.

Sam said, “You’ll break the line!”

Will said, “Shut up, idiot!” He reached into his tackle box and pulled out a yellow nylon stringer. Then he reeled in a little more and got even closer to the fish. He leaned over the starboard side of the boat, reaching for it. The boat tilted dangerously close to the water. But he couldn’t reach. He reeled in a little bit more.

The fish was holding still, the line wrapped around the kelp just barely under the surface of the water. Only his tail swished back and forth. His mouth still gaped wide open, showing those horrifying teeth.

Will reached over, and he was close enough this time. He reached down and stuck the metal-covered end of the stringer through the fish’s open gills. But it didn’t come out his mouth the way I know Will meant it to. And he damn sure wasn’t going to stick his fingers in with those teeth. So he yelled to Sam to get him the pliers. Meanwhile, I watched the starboard edge of the boat and the surface of the water. They were even more dangerously close together.

“He’s got to be thirty inches, easy,” Will said. Sam said nothing. Which I took to mean he was probably thirty inches, easy.

Sam handed over the pliers, and Will reached them into the ling’s mouth and caught the end of the stringer. Caught it on the second try. He pulled it out with a bragging yell: “Ha ha!” Threaded it through the ring on the other end. Then he sat back and pulled hard, and it slipped into place. Just like a stringer is supposed to do. Tightened down like a leash wrapped through the gill and out the mouth. But this leash would be pretty hard to break. Will sat back and sneered at Sam. Meanwhile, he wrapped the end of the stringer three or four times around his hand.

“Told you this was my lingcod day. Told you my luck was about to change.”

He pulled hard on the stringer, but he still couldn’t pull the fish out of the kelp. He pulled a second time, and the starboard side of the boat rocked disastrously close to the water. He even tried cutting his line, but it was really wrapped around the kelp. It didn’t come free of the fish’s end. Will pulled even harder.

“Hey, watch out, idiot,” Sam yelled. “You’ll sink us.”

“I am *not* losing this fish. Ernie, hand me that knife.”

I grabbed the bait board and handed Will the knife. He used it to point in the direction of his brother’s face. “This never would’ve happened if you’d gotten me the net when I asked for it.”

“It was tangled up.”

“You didn’t try hard enough. Because you don’t *want* my luck to change.” Will pulled

hard as he could on the stringer, then leaned over the starboard side of the boat with the knife, grabbing strands of kelp, pulling them close to the boat, and cutting them. The harder he pulled, the closer the side of the boat got to the water.

Sam started reeling in so his line wouldn't get snared up in the kelp. I was about to do the same, but I never got that far.

I looked up and saw a really scary swell coming our way. The boat had turned around now so the starboard side was facing the swells. And the next swell was a really big one. And the side of the boat and the water were only about an inch apart.

"Will, sit up," I said. "Sit up a minute. There's a big swell coming."

"I've almost got it."

Sam looked up and saw what I saw. But he didn't say anything to Will. He took it out of me instead. "Fat Boy, sit on the port side!"

I did, and it helped a little. But maybe not enough.

Will sat up and hit Sam in the head. "Leave him alone," he said. Then he leaned over to cut the last piece of kelp.

"Will, sit up! Now!"

"I've got it," he said. "I've got it." He started to sit up. But as he did, he lifted the fish in the boat, and that brought the starboard side down even farther. Right to the waterline.

That's when the swell hit.

It washed so much water into the boat that it slid me down to the low side, and I just kept going. Right off the boat and into the water. I closed my eyes and held my breath. The water was shockingly cold. I don't even know how to describe how cold it was. Like being dipped in a glass of ice water. It hurt. It felt almost like being burned. Not exactly, but a little. Really hot and really cold feel a little bit the same. They both sting almost the same way.

At first I just kept going down, but then I slowed and headed for the surface. There is one thing to be said for fat. It floats. My head bobbed up into air. I still had the rod in my hand. I couldn't lose Will's rod.

I looked around. The boat was gone. Nowhere. Worse yet, nobody. No Will, no Sam. Just me and a great blue heron standing on one leg on the kelp bed. Then I saw one of the wooden oars floating near my head, and the blue-and-white bait cooler bobbing on the water. I saw all three bright orange life jackets. I tried to dog-paddle over to one.

Just then Will's head came up, and he raised his right hand to show me the end of the stringer, still wrapped around it. "It's okay," he said. "I still got him."

My mouth fell open, and a little salt water lapped in, and I had to spit it out again. "Okay? It's okay? Dude, we sank your father's boat!"

We just looked at each other for a minute. Treaded water. The cold was going from painful to numb. Something banged into the back of my head. When I turned around, I saw it was the other oar.

"Oh, this is bad," Will said. Then his big fish pulled so hard that Will's head disappeared.

When he bobbed up again, I said, "Yeah. No shit this is bad. Where's Sam?"

I know it's weird. But I really hadn't thought of it until right when I said it.

"I don't know," Will said. But he didn't sound too concerned. "When did you last see him?"

"Before that swell hit. Can he swim?"

"Oh, hell yeah. He can swim circles around both of us. He's a competition swimmer." Will turned all around, looking. "Sam!" We just waited. "Messing with us, that's where he is. Behind that rock, I bet. He's fine."

I thought I saw a dark look pass over his face, but I might've been wrong. Everything was dark just then. Who could tell one dark thing from another?

I paddled over to one of the life jackets. Slipped it on. Threw another one to Will. It was hard to buckle it, though. I had to hold the pole between my knees and adjust the straps waist out, and my fingers didn't work right. But I got it buckled. Finally. When I looked up, Will had his on, too. He had a look of true panic on his face.

"What am I gonna tell my dad? We lost everything. Not even just the boat. The outboard motor. All the rods, all the tackle."

"Well, you've got both oars," I said. "And the cooler, and the life vests. And this rod." I held up my right hand. I couldn't even feel I had anything in my right hand, but I held it up and the rod was still there.

Then something weird happened. If there really is a God, I think he's a funny guy. I think he has a sense of humor. Maybe at my expense. The tip of the rod jerked three or four times.

"You got something," Will said.

I tried to reel up. But my hands didn't work very well. They were really numb and froze by then. But eventually I got it up where I could see it.

"Hey," Will said. "You caught a nice red."

"Yeah, that's a great consolation. Lost the boat, caught a nice red."

"Well, at least you didn't get skunked."

It was red all right. Bright orangey red. I didn't even know colors like that existed in the fish world. By my standards as a trout fisherman, it was a big fish. Compared to Will's ling, it was tiny. It hardly mattered at all.

"Give it to me," he said. "I'll put it on the stringer."

I went through the motions with him. But some part of me felt like I was watching the whole thing from above. Standing outside myself. Thinking how weird it was to even still be caring about the fish. Treading water, probably eighty feet above the boat, putting the large fish on the stringer. Like nothing had happened.

I reeled the line the rest of the way in and hooked one of the treble hooks on one of the pole's guides, then reeled up tight so the hook would stay. I didn't want to catch myself on it. And I was determined to get to shore with that rod. It was the only piece of equipment I was responsible for. No way was I letting it go.

I shoved the handle of it into the waistband of my jeans.

I looked up and saw people standing on the beach watching us. "I hope they call somebody," I said. "I hope they call it in. Call 911. Maybe they'll call the Coast Guard or

Search and Rescue or whatever.”

Will just swam away. I could tell he was going to look on the other side of the rock. I got scared, thinking what if he was wrong and nobody was there. But he said the kid could swim.

Will's head came out from behind the rock again. “He probably swam to shore just to show us he can get there before we even start.”

“We'd have seen him.”

“I saw him,” he said. “Right there.”

“Where?” I looked, but all I saw was ocean.

“I just saw his head pop up, just there. I know I did.” He sounded like it was really important that I believe him. Or maybe even that he believe himself.

“Hoo-boy, I hope you're right. Will, I can't swim all the way to shore.”

“You don't have much choice,” he said.

I think we were about a fifth of the way back to shore when we got rescued. Maybe we weren't even that far.

It was Fish and Game who came and got us. I think somebody put a call over the radio, and Fish and Game was close by. Two guys on a sort of pontoon boat. But it had a motor and was fast.

They pulled us up and on board, but they both had to grab hold of me and pull, which was just so humiliating.

One of the guys had really short hair, like his head had been shaved but now he had five o'clock shadow. The other guy was wearing this bandanna on his head like a do-rag. Bandanna Man said, “I know you kids can't have been out here on your own.”

“No, sir,” Will said. “My brother was out here, too. We think he swam ashore.” Then he pulled the stringer up.

The shaved guy whistled. “Nice ling. Must be over thirty inches. Man, that's a beauty. You catch that, son?”

“No, sir,” Will said. “My friend Ernie did. I caught this red snapper.”

I looked at Will but he wouldn't catch my eye.

Bandanna Man said, “Who's the grown-up in charge here?”

Will said, “Well, my dad. He was gonna pick us up in six hours.”

The two men looked at each other. Then they started up the motor and we raced at the shore. Got there like ten times faster than it took us to get out. They ran the motor until the boat slid right up on the sand.

There was a crowd of people waiting for us. Well, a small crowd. Maybe a dozen. And an ambulance parked on the road, but we didn't need that. We were fine. And a sheriff's car with the red lights spinning.

Bandanna Guy yelled out to the crowd. He said, “Anybody see another boy come ashore?”

Everybody shook their heads.

I sat on the end of that boat ramp with this stiff gray blanket wrapped around me, but I was still freezing. I could feel my teeth knocking together when they chattered. I tried so hard to stop shaking, but I just couldn't stop.

I could still feel the motion of the swells when I closed my eyes.

The Fish and Game guys were back out on the water, looking for Sam, and there was another boat out there now, too. Some kind of Search and Rescue boat, with a diver on board. And a helicopter kept buzzing back and forth over the water.

I was thinking, I must be in hell. This must be hell. I'm cold and miserable, I'm starving hungry, Will and I are in deep trouble, we still haven't found Sam, and I have no way to get home. And it just kept going on, for what felt like hours. I was thinking, If I ever go to hell for real, which I hope I don't, it couldn't be any worse than this.

A minute later the sheriff's deputy came walking down the boat ramp. "I found your father," he said. "But he's in no condition to drive you boys home. You got any other options on a ride?"

"We could call my mother," I said. I gave him the number. I wanted to call her myself, but he had to do it from his car, through dispatch. "Tell her I'm okay," I said as he walked up the ramp. "Don't forget. She worries."

"All mothers worry," he said.

I looked over at Will. "I'm staying," he said. "Here. Don't forget your fish."

He took the red off the stringer and handed me the stringer, lingcod and all.

"I don't get it."

"You think I want my father to know I was thinking about not losing a big fish while his boat was sinking? That I made sure I kept hold of the ling but I'm not sure what happened to Sam?"

I took the ling. Held it out at arm's length. It was still marginally alive. It still had teeth. It still looked like the devil. And, sure enough, the minute it came up from the deep, everything had gone straight to hell.

When she was finally ready to take a breath from bawling me out, my mother left me home and went to get takeout. It was such a relief. I was trying to shut up and just let her get it out of her system. But I felt like it was never going to end.

"Get sushi," I said, because I like California rolls, and they're not too fattening.

"Honey, we can't afford sushi every time. I'll get McDonald's."

I sighed and drew myself a hot bath. I figured it was the only way I would ever get warm again. I'm not weird. This'll sound weird, but I'm not. I drew a bubble bath. There's a method to my madness. It's impossible to see your body through all those bubbles. All through this something in the back of my head kept saying, Sam.

I took the phone into the bathroom with me and set it on the bath mat. I just stared at it the whole time I soaked. But it never made a sound.

After I finally felt warm again, I went into the kitchen and stared at that enormous dead

devil-fish sitting on some old newspaper on the counter. That sea monster. It looked like was staring back at me. Creepy. I had no idea what to do with it.

Peaches was walking back and forth under the counter, sniffing. Good thing she has real short legs. She could never get up on that counter.

I know how to fillet a fish. If a trout is twelve inches or under, I usually cook it whole. But if it's a big one, fourteen inches or more, I fillet it. But this guy ... I took my fillet knife out of the drawer and held it up to the fish. It wouldn't even reach all the way through to the spine. I couldn't figure out where to start. I was tempted to throw it in the outside trash. But it's a crime to waste a big fish like that. Any fish. I'm not big on the idea of sin, but if there was ever a sin, it's to kill an animal and then not even eat it.

I called Uncle Max. Thinking, Sam.

I said, "Uncle Max, I caught this big, giant lingcod, like over thirty inches, and I don't even know how to fillet it, and I was wondering if you could drive down tomorrow and help me."

He said, "Oh, had a good day, huh?"

I said, "No. It was horrible. It was the worst day ever. This big swell sank the boat, and we had to be rescued, and Mom is royally pissed that we went out on a boat without a grown-up and we still don't know where Will's little brother is." Halfway through saying it, I started to cry. I hate to cry. Hate it. Even when I'm all alone. In front of somebody, it's the worst. But if I was going to cry in front of anybody, at least it was Uncle Max.

"Oh," he said. "I guess that explains why you want me to drive down. Instead of just telling you how to fillet it over the phone."

"I guess," I said. It was almost like he was trying to get me to say I needed help. Which is a really hard thing for me. But he was right, of course. I was really asking him to drive down because he was my uncle Max. Sometimes you just need your uncle Max.

"Okay. Will do. Just gut it and put it in the fridge, and I'll leave as soon as I wake up in the morning."

My mother came back in with three bags from the fast-food place. Scary to think what she ordered wouldn't even fit into two bags.

I said, "Thanks, Uncle Max." And got off the phone.

While she laid it all out on the table, I slit the belly of the fish and pulled the guts out onto the newspaper. Considering the size of the fish, there weren't a lot of guts. More like just what a trout would have. Or, in this case, a dozen trout. I used my knife to cut them away from the ends and right behind the head, and then I stuck the front end of the fish in the kitchen sink and scraped out the blood vein as best I could. Rinsed it inside and cleaned it out with four or five paper towels. Wrapped the fish in plastic wrap, round and round until it was all covered.

"Come on, Ernie," my mother said. "It's going to get cold."

"I'll be right there."

But I wasn't right there. I had to find space for that monster in the fridge. This was no small task, believe me. We have lots of food in our fridge. I had to move things around. Stack things on top of other things. Take out a bunch of stuff like ketchup and mustard and salad

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