MARK JACOBS

Sturgeon

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My mother swore up and down it was pure coincidence, me showing up at home the same day the old man decided he had to land himself a sturgeon. I wanted to think it was more than that, it was unholy concatenation. Whatever the old man thought, he kept it to himself. Knowing my father, the fact that it was illegal to fish for sturgeon in New York State was the pepperoni on his pizza. Me showing up without warning, I couldn't say what that meant to him.

I told him I wasn't going sturgeon fishing with him. Telling him no was less than useless. I was only laying down a marker he'd ignore.

Big Chief Blow His Top, that was what my mother called him in the old days. Edmund Greene was half English, a quarter Irish, and an eighth Lithuanian. But from the way he bragged on the remaining eighth, you'd have thought he was pureblood Indian. He called the Tuscarora 'my people.' When I was a kid, he made driving on the reservation a pilgrimage; Ed Greene's trail of crocodile tears, my mother called it.

"My thinking is, we go at night," he told me.

We were sitting outside in lawn chairs. It was July, full summer. The corn was well above knee high. When the plant closed and ChemEx reneged on my father's pension, my folks economized. They bought a used double-wide, planted it on a half-acre lot between two cornfields outside Youngstown, near Lake Ontario. The scarecrows were my father's inspiration; the farmer who owned the cornfields never asked him to put them up. There was one in each field, and the design of the head allowed for interchangeable masks. Usually the masks looked like the faces of politicians.

"So do you want to hear about the book or not?" I said.

"Of course he wants to hear about your book," my mother lied. She poured herself some iced tea and skimmed a handful of pretzels from the bowl she'd brought out.

My mother was originally from Florida, the panhandle, where her father ran a fishing camp. It was convenient for my mother, having those Western New York winters to hold against her husband, as though he'd kidnapped her before she reached the age of reason. He

called her Appalachee Slim, which had once been appropriate, even affectionate. I'd seen the pictures, and I remembered her as an attractive woman. Now, weighing in at a hundred and seventy, with arms like legs, it was a bad joke. Not that my father was in a position to make any cracks. In my absence, he'd turned into a barrel of pork and beans.

What Doreen Greene called her claim to fame was having attended parties on both coasts with famous rock groups back in their playing prime: the Stones, the Who, Grand Funk Railroad. She had a list, and a stack of evidentiary Polaroids. She never explained what she did to gain entrance to those parties or what she did once she got in, and by the time I grew curious enough to ask, I didn't want to know.

"How much they give you for the book?" my father wanted to know.

"A hundred and fifty thousand."

"Right, and I'm the H & R Block guy does Bill Gates' taxes."

That was stupid on my part. I should have said forty thousand. He might have believed forty K, which was still more than my actual advance. My first novel had just been published by a small commercial press in a print run of seventy-five hundred. I didn't care about the money, much. I was more interested in the reviews, which were mostly good. There'd been a couple of snarky attacks, but I didn't let them get under my skin. My thinking was, if all you could do was badmouth a book instead of write one, well… to each his own.

I had stayed away from home until I had the book in hand. Years. I was making a point. But sitting there under an umbrella watching the scarecrows' ragged black arms flap in the July breeze, my father peeling the label from a Molson's Ale with his thumbnail, my mother spraying a constant stream of Raid at a wasp that didn't want to die, I realized nobody else cared about or even knew that I was making it.

"So like I was saying," my father said, "we go at night."

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I have to say this much for him, Ed Greene did his homework. When it came to his obsessions, he was always prepped. When we cast our lines into the Lower Niagara at Joseph Davis State Park, above the mouth of the river where it spat its silver rapids into Lake Ontario, he knew there had been sturgeon sightings in the vicinity. Getting there took a little effort, but that was also typical of the old man's obsessions. The park was closed

at night, so we had to park the truck and walk with our gear through the summer dark, which was actually kind of a cool thing to be doing: sneaking under trees and across fields under an incomplete pale moon in the company of my marginally Tuscaroran father, the insects of summer raising their encouraging racket around us saying *Go ahead, only God owns the land, it's yours to trespass on*. We hiked down the gorge until we found a flat rock not too far above the water, which was black and moving fast, fast, fast.

"They've been seeing 'em in the eddies, the fish scientists," my father told me as he cast his 30-pound-test line into the pool. I waited a minute and cast after him, not an easy thing to do with that heavy line, but according to the old man's research, the few times a sturgeon had been hooked in the Niagara, the fish had instantly snapped the fisherman's line. We were using frozen shrimp as bait, from a package my mother had been planning to do something special with, but she voiced no objection when he lifted it from the freezer. In some respects it looked like they still had still a good marriage.

"What makes you think they weren't using thirty-pound test?"

"Trust me, those clowns were using ten-pound line. Nobody thinks ahead. Uncap me one of those beers why don't you, Nelson?"

So we made ourselves comfortable and waited for a sturgeon to nibble one of our presumably thawing shrimp. He asked me, "You know what the world record for a lake sturgeon is?"

I had no idea; did he really think I might?

"Hundred and sixty eight pounds, across the way there in Ontario."

I wished he would ask me something about my book. When I gave him his copy, he'd leafed through it the way people scanned the *World Weekly News* at the grocery checkout, then set it on the coffee table. Face up, anyway; he left it face up.

My father knew we were going about catching a sturgeon the wrong way. In his study of the creature he'd learned about running setlines. You anchored a line in a likely spot, having fixed hooks along it every ten feet or so, and snagged them in schools, if it happened to be an academic year and the fish matriculated. You could also catch sturgeon in a net, of course, but I don't think the possibility even crossed his mind. It was rod and reel or nothing. I understood why and respected his reasons. When Ed Greene was growing up in Niagara Falls, sturgeons had vanished from the river, fished and polluted out of existence. He listened to the oldtimers'

stories about the giant specimens people had landed back in the day, and the sturgeon took on mythical characteristics in his imagination's memory. I'd seen pictures. There was something prehistoric about the sturgeon, which only increased its throwback appeal. When my father heard they were stocking the river, trying to bring the fish back, it was like hearing you could turn time around, make it run in the other direction, toward life instead of death.

His mind was on the third beer, which I was passing him in the dark, which was why he didn't have quite the grip he should have had on his pole, which was why he lost his rig the instant the fish bit and yanked. You would have thought that would tick him off, but he was ecstatic.

"What'd I tell you? I knew they were in there."

"How do you know it wasn't a pike, Pop, or a musky?"

"The muskellunge is a noble fish, Nelson. I know guys fished this river their whole life and never landed one. But this was a sturgeon. You could tell by the way he went after that shrimp."

We waited another forty five minutes, but no fish of any description was interested in the shrimp on my hook. We went home and slept what both of us considered the sleep of the innocent. My mother was already gone when I rolled out of bed at seven in the morning. She worked as a greeter at an IHOP and took the early shift by choice. Things were tight for my folks even with both of them working. The old man did odd jobs, and he periodically made a few bucks scavenging and reselling copper, which had always been a kind of avocation for him even when he worked at ChemEx. I'd wanted to do something to celebrate my book, so before he got up I went out and bought him a new fishing pole. It took a while, but I also managed to find some 80-pound test line. The guy who sold it to me didn't get my joke about going after the great white whale, when he asked me what the hell I planned to catch with it. Too many page hits, too few pages between covers.

The new pole and the heavy line really tickled my father; more, it hurt me to see, than my book did. It was his custom to have a beer – just one – after breakfast, and he sat outside in the sun making practice casts with the new rig and taking small sips of his Molson's. Watching him, I felt pretty good. In the cornfield to the west of the trailer, some Albany politician I didn't recognize danced a windy jig, and the sun burnished the salvaged copper stacked on pallets at the end of the driveway.

There's one other interesting thing to tell you about Edmund Greene. He used to have a photographic mem-

ory. So he always claimed, and it was one of the things he said that I believed. He lost the gift in Vietnam. Not in combat, but when they assigned him to offload fifty-five gallon drums of Agent Orange. After that, his memory was never better than average. For years he'd followed the litigation, learning all about 2, 4-D and 2,4, 5-T, the herbicides the stuff was composed of. But he never filed a claim for compensation. How could you prove you used to have a photographic memory and then lost it? I liked that about my father, his realism, which somehow complemented his obsessions.

That afternoon I went with him in his truck to commandeer some copper. He tooled up the gravel drive of a newly abandoned factory out on the Lake Road as though Big Chief Blow His Top had just been hired to look after the place in its industrial senescence.

"Get out and swing that barrier out of the way," he told me. I did, and we went confidently on up to the site.

"If they catch you," I pointed out as he parked in front of what used to be a generator room, "they catch me. How would that look, Pop? Aspiring author nabbed in copper heist?"

"One thing about you, Nelson, is you worry too much. You always did. You get that from your mother. I never saw such a worry wart."

Maybe he was right, because there happened to be no watchman on the premises, and we stripped enough copper out of junked equipment to make it worth our while. Working with the old man, sweating and stripping and hauling, I was happier than I would have expected to be, under the circumstances. He seemed happy, too. On a break, he handed me a Molson's and said, "You know what we need, Nelson? We need a boat."

So after we unloaded the copper at home, he paid a visit to a buddy of his in the Falls. This was a guy he'd worked with at ChemEx who had also been exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam, causing him to lose his native optimism. I stayed home because being around Billy Sparks would bring down the queen of the cheerleaders. But I was there the next morning when my father backed the trailer into the water off the north end of Grand Island, in the upper river maybe five miles above the falls.

Which meant I was with him in Sparks' fiberglass twenty-footer when the engine died and we started drifting fallsward at a worrisomely steady clip. This had all the earmarks of a serious situation. Boats aren't allowed to go past a certain point in the upper river because the current is so strong, the rapids so violent, that no motor can compete. There's a kind of Ultima Thule sign posted at the point of no return, and as my father fiddled with

the engine I kept my eyes out for the sign as though that might help, somehow.

He didn't panic, which impressed me. He worked methodically at the engine with focused determination, but that only intensified my fear. At a certain point, after he knew he wasn't going to be able to make the thing run, he took off his aviator shades and squinted at me in the bright sun as though evaluating this person he was likely to wind up going over the falls in a boat with. I had no idea what kind of judgment he came to.

"I guess you probably never took a course in small-engine repair," he said, not intending it to be funny.

"Nope." I was the last thing from handy. Genevieve, the woman I was living with in Albuquerque, was the one who owned the tools in our household. I was the word guy. In fact it was books that were on my mind as we drifted toward the cataract. It wasn't fair. I had only written one book. There were ten more books inside me, I knew there were; maybe twelve. Maybe more, and now I wasn't going to write any of them.

It felt to me as though we were moving faster, by that point, and although I couldn't read it yet, there was a sign up ahead that I was pretty sure said we were going to die.

"Goddamn Billy Sparks," said my father, and I agreed. That was what made my eyes tear, agreeing so passionately with the old man on an important subject.

I was right about the sign. We cruised past it helpless as babies in a cradle. The rapids were so loud they were like a chorus announcing the end of the Greene line. On shore, a woman on a bicycle had stopped riding and started pointing at us. My father bent again over the dead engine.

I never had any qualms about paying taxes and never will, since it was federal tax dollars that paid for the Coast Guard cutter that brought us to shore. I didn't even mind when the commander of the cutter read us the riot act. Neither did my father, which was unlike him. Ed Greene was a born bridler. We hung our heads and said thank you again and again, and thank you again. When they finally left us alone with the citations and we were standing there waiting for Billy Sparks to come pick us up, the trembling in my legs would not go away.

Sparks was alarmed enough to claim that he'd checked out the engine the day before, but it was an unconvincing performance, and by the time we got back to the truck on Grand Island and drove home, my father and I were both drained flat, like those unlucky snakes you see squashed on the highway out in the New Mexico desert.

"Your mother," he said in the driveway. We sat there

in the cab staring at the pallets of stacked copper, too wiped out to open the door, let alone get out. It looked solid, all that copper. A vision of stability, something to take a picture of and remember, the way you remembered monuments.

"I won't say anything."

"I didn't think you would. So, I guess we're back where we started, hey?"

"Where's that, Pop?"

"If we're going to catch one of those suckers, it's going to be from dry land."

"I can't stay. I have to get back to New Mexico."

"New Mexico will be there," he told me. "New Mexico ain't in any kind of hurry."

"It's Genevieve."

"She'd love it if you caught a big fish. Any woman would. In some cultures, sturgeons are well known as aphrodisiacs."

"I can't stay, Pop."

"You know what I think? I think the frozen shrimp was a mistake. That's where we went wrong."

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He knew I'd stay. I didn't have a job to get back to. I was living, sparingly, off the advance from the novel, although the fact was, Genevieve was pretty much picking up the tab for both of us. She didn't seem to mind. She liked her job as a paralegal, and she was a real reader. I'd been watching her, observing things. She got as much pleasure out of seeing my name on the book jacket as I did myself. And once, I'd heard her on the phone telling her best friend she thought I might be a genius. It was too soon to say, but she thought my next book was going to prove something, and she wanted to be around to see what that something was.

So I stayed. My father kept reading up on sturgeons. Some of them, he learned, lived a hundred and fifty years, a fact that fired my imagination as much as it did his. Even my mother seemed taken with the notion of a fish that could live that long. We were hunting a lacustrine Methuselah, or did I mean riverine? Although it was a lake sturgeon, we were fishing for him in a river. One of his relatives, anyway; a nephew, a kid sister. We had a party the evening of the day we almost went over the falls in Billy Sparks' boat, information that only two thirds of us possessed. My mother got out her stack of curled Polaroids and told us anecdotes about some of the rock & roll guys she used to hang with. I told her she should write a book. She told me I should write it for her. My father told us both he'd handle the promotion.

It was a surprise ceasefire in the life of our family that should have fixed anything that needed fixing, except it still bugged me that the old man hadn't even picked up my novel. It really bugged me.

Next morning my father went to a butcher he liked and came home with a cooler full of chicken gizzards. We went back to Grand Island and tried fishing from the north shore. No luck. Then we tried different spots along the Lower Niagara, anyplace we could climb down the gorge to get to, hauling our stuff, which included a Styrofoam cooler. No luck. Sturgeon had supposedly been sighted by divers at the mouth of the river, and against both our better judgment my father borrowed another boat. We tried a few of the shallow spots along the edge of Lake Ontario. Once the fish got loose in the lake finding them was an impossible long shot, though, and we knew it.

Genevieve called. She said she missed me. I called her back, told her I missed her, too, which was true. I didn't say anything about fishing for sturgeon. I didn't know how to make it come out right. Albuquerque seemed farther away, just then, than it probably was.

We went through a lot of chicken gizzards. At the end of an eighty-pound line, a gizzard doesn't feel any bigger than a fly. Once I caught a thirty-pound channel cat but threw it back. It was an ugly fish, nothing whatsoever inspiring about landing or looking at one.

Genevieve called again to say she liked sleeping with me in the bed a lot better than sleeping alone. Also, she'd found a new Vietnamese restaurant she wanted to take me to. Also, she wondered whether I was taking any notes for the next story.

As a kid, I had survived a string of my father's obsessions, which usually ended badly. When they didn't, he got distracted. This was different. Nothing seemed to shake him from his pursuit of the sturgeon, and when I'd been home a week and a half, over his post-breakfast beer he told me we were going to try Joseph Davis Park again. This time we'd go in the evening, while it was still light and he could see what he was doing.

My mother packed supper for us, and by late afternoon we were back on the same flat rock we'd started out on, the night the old man lost his pole. The gorge was tranquil in shadow. The river was a heartbreaking shade of green I will probably always lack a word for. Brown and white gulls grazed the boiling white rapids and rose, grazed and rose. I lost my bait. Lost it again. My father lost his.

And then he didn't. This time when the fish went for his bait, he had a firm grip on his pole. It bent double,

and my father yanked to set the hook in the fish's mouth. It could have been anything: a musky, a pike, maybe even a bass. But I knew what my father knew, that it was a sturgeon on the other end of his line.

It was hard work, playing a big fish with that heavy, clumsy line, and my father was not in good shape. He grunted with every movement his body made, voluntary or involuntary. He sweated everywhere. His face turned the color of righteous outrage. Meanwhile, the fish, which was in excellent physical condition, conceded nothing. It took back every inch of line the old man reeled in. I opened a beer. I watched. It was like a tug of war, and the fish had every advantage but one: Ed Greene didn't have a hook in his lip.

After fifteen minutes of that back and forth my father was played out, while the fish was not. After twenty minutes, I thought about offering to take over but decided I shouldn't. After twenty five minutes, the old man carefully passed me the pole, and I played it for another ten minutes or so. In the end the fish would have won, but the hook in his lip was set too deeply, and the fat line held, and the pole was lithe and strong, capable of infinite bending, and my father and I could spell each other. The archaic monster we landed looked to me like it might go sixty pounds, but my father said seventy five.

I stood there with my feet on it as it gasped and thrashed on the rock. "Should I throw it back in?"

"Hell, no. That was too damn much work, to turn around and let the bastard go again."

"It's illegal."

"Not after that kind of effort it's not."

So we waited until dark, finishing my mother's picnic supper and the better part of two six-packs. Then we sneaked out of the park and dumped the sturgeon, which meantime had expired with dignity, into the back of the pickup. We drove to the M-60, a bar my father liked out on Saunders Settlement Road run by an ex-Army tank gunner. Ed knew maybe half the guys who came outside to look at the sturgeon, but the M-60 was not the kind of bar whose patrons would call up the fish and game police – if that's who you called in these cases – to report an illegal sturgeon. One guy who lived nearby took it home and weighed it on his bathroom scale, and my father was closer to right than I'd been: our fish weighed seventy six pounds and eleven ounces. The scale was accurate, the guy claimed; his wife did Weight Watchers.

For the moment, time was moving backwards, toward the beginning, for a change, and not the end. Everybody who saw the sturgeon wanted to buy us a round, and my father wanted to buy a round, and I did,

too. I was as happy as I thought I was probably going to get. Then somebody I vaguely remembered – another ChemEx guy who'd been robbed of his pension when the company was bought out and twelve people made millions and seven thousand people lost pretty much everything – asked me what I was doing in the Falls.

"Just came home to see the folks," I told him. "Living in Albuquerque."

"Bullshit," said my father, which of course pricked up all available ears.

"What's bullshit?" said the ChemEx guy.

The bartender picked up the remote and killed the volume on the television.

"He's here," said the old man. He stopped and took a swig from his glass. "Nelson came home to bring me a copy of this new book he wrote."

"What kind of book?"

"It's a novel."

"No shit."

"It's called Soft Landing," my father explained. "It's kind of like a love story, you might say, but not exactly." Then he took a good five minutes to lay out the plot line of my book and describe the characters and say how it was different from anything else he'd ever read. As he talked about the book our fish was momentarily insignificant.

"That's great," the guy from ChemEx said. He was a whiskey-eyed man, bitter about his luck after twenty some years in the same factory, but I could see he didn't mind the idea of somebody else having better luck than he'd had.

Everybody was trying to buy me another beer, at that point, in honor of the book, but I had reached and then zoomed over my limit, with the beer we'd drunk at Joseph Davis and the beer we'd drunk at the M-60, waiting for the guy to come back and tell us how much the sturgeon weighed. The glasses stacked up on the bar behind me.

"You gonna write another book?" the bartender wanted to know. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt and boots and looked military. You've seen those bristling guys; they're all over, men with some kind of connection, real or imaginary, to the warrior class. He had to be the owner.

I was all set to tell him about the next book. I had made up my mind – it was made up before I wrote the first word of Soft Landing, probably – that I wasn't going to be the kind of writer who couldn't be bothered to answer people's questions. I'd seen a few of those, watched their arrogance suck the air from the room they stood

in. So I started explaining my new idea, but my father interrupted me impatiently.

"It's about a big fish," he said. "Nelson's new book."

"That's cool," said the bartender, nodding respectfully in my direction.

"It's got a river in it," my father told the bartender, and the ChemEx guy, and everybody else who was listening, which at that point was everybody. "A famous river, with rapids. It's about an old guy with a good memory."

"I like it," said the bartender, sounding like he really did. He asked me, "What you gonna call the new one, Nelson?"

"It's called 'Sturgeon,'" I told him, because all of a sudden it was.