

FRONT PORCH

Donna D. Vitucci

Gun Lake

August in Michigan burned like a candle in a tin bucket, all cheap light and flickering heat. What relief the heavens squeezed in before sunrise. One fucked-up dad intended to spend that cool part of the dog days fishing a familiar lake with his boy. Even half-tanked, the dad could cast with accuracy—or was it my luck?—piercing the lake’s skin while disturbing nothing else. Directly from my finish of the night shift, I’d ingested the usual vodka currently absorbed into the coils of my intestine and swift brain-ward. Lucky the lake was in walking distance, so I didn’t have to drive us there. My gummed-up sight accepted vague definitions of cabins and fishing shacks, which might as well have been set at the edge of the world. Unable to see beyond my fingers made me feel suspended in a cocoon, me and Brian in these early hours, intent on trolling Gun Lake. Only a piece of so much I’d promised him.

Brian brushed my knee with his tackle box as he worked at keeping up with my wobble. At first I resisted ruffling his cowlick, and then I went ahead and got in a touch before he pulled away.

“Mosquito,” I said. “Didn’t want you bit.”

He’d take any excuse, and I’d been feeding them, one after the other, to him and his mom all summer.

My pre-dawn drunk rendered Brian a little ghost as he peered up at me. “We’re gonna catch ‘em off guard, right Dad?”

“You bet. They won’t know what hit ‘em. They’ll just be cruising along with their big ole eyes staring wide ahead, and they won’t even see the line attached. They’ll go for it, and then—whump!—we’ll have ‘em.”

Once we hit the end of the dock, we cranked open a can of corn. I forgot to buy bait and it was all Lorna had in the pantry since she preferred the fresh produce we could get plentiful in summer.

This being south Michigan summer, so south you’re almost in Ohio and you know how bad that can be—hot, long, damn summer, itchy summer, summer that wants a nice, relieving scratch. I knew just where to find such relief: Heidi, from the Ford plant, an inspector in my area. Check off ten things on a chart, move down the line for the next monotonous inspection. She checked me, I checked her. Everybody was in compliance. Oh yes, we were complying, supplying, multiplying. I could’ve written a song called “Multiplication of Love.” Didn’t know what it’d mean, but I liked the sound of the title.

Heidi sang to me while she raked her well-kept nails over my skin, the usual places you might expect—down my back, along my waist, dividing my balls. We nailed each other to the carpet. She was up for positions Lorna hadn’t seen in years, maybe had never seen.

How come me and Lorna hadn’t gone in for such fun? Brian—there’s your explanation, right at my elbow, threading a niblet trio on a hook with concentration. Kids fuck up the plan. Kids bring a whole different slew of stars to guide by. Don’t think I hadn’t tried talking to Lorna about how we’d turned on more to Brian than each other. It’s fucking weird, I tell you, this allegiance of a mother and dad and the primal genes that come to the fore, or redirect, once our progeny get a stake in the world.

Brian said, “The fish’ll like the bait, right, Dad?”

“Shhh, now.” I felt a headache squeezing behind my ears. “They’ll like silence.”

My boy nodded, standing there in his camo shorts and black tee shirt, solemnly watching the bobbers. He dressed like the skateboarders who rode the curbs outside the mall. I used to bring Brian here to Gun Lake, still sleepy in his pajamas, his hair smelling of cookies or Jolly Ranchers, because he wanted to be a fisherman like Daddy from the time he could walk.

Once I asked for quiet, I got it. The trouble with the sport is it leaves too much time for contemplation.

Lorna called me, at various times, a drunk, a skunk, a slam-damn-dunk, piled so much negativity it'd send any man off looking for some positive. When Heidi and me punched out of work at dawn, we went to the Crab Ass, a funny shack listing crab on the menu though it was never available. The place was the kind of 24/7 joint that survives due to placement near a plant running three shifts, and every one of the employees coming off thirsty. We ordered frog legs when we needed to soak up our vodka. We called the place the Grab Ass. We danced to Nazareth crying out that "Love Hurts" from the jukebox. A bit before noon, we'd push off, half-blinded and beyond buzzed, the hot gravel parking lot one big assault to our retinas.

Sun-up at Gun Lake started peeling back my eyelids. I figured I'd have to squint just to get through this fishing expedition, poorly planned and with maybe even worse execution.

In the Grab Ass parking lot, when Heidi first straddled behind me on the Harley, I told her, "Tuck in. Lean when I lean. Duck if I duck." Directions for so much other than bike riding.

To Brian I said, "Careful, or you'll fall in. Don't pull. Lean with it."

Commotion of one small boy, whose veins pump a mixture of your blood and your wife's blood, skittering around on a creaky old dock, jubilant about his catch—how could that not weaken a man? The hangover didn't help. Together we reeled in a sunfish the size of a saucer.

Bri said, "We gotta take it home and show Mom," so I packed it in the ice keeping my Cokes cold, Cokes I'd loaded to help soothe my stomach and keep me awake. Which only delivered on the second of those two hopes.

A measly sunfish, but enough to string out Brian's desire to return another morning with his dad to this moldy dock. What was under our feet creaked with the sun warming it. The bogginess of the lake crawled up our noses and threw its arm across the backs of our necks, a chill breeding goodness in me after one fucked-up, burned-out summer. Embracing Bri's spindly arms when we worked to pull that fish from the water, which didn't take much, really, but the way he leaned in and *trusted me*, his anchor was everything. He tied me to the lake, if that makes any sense. And I knew I had to stop that shit with Heidi.

Before we'd left the house, I'd made him walk with me through a cloud of Cutter, and that sweet insecticide, now mixed with my boy's sweat, choked me up so I had to back off from him.

"Yeah, Mom'll get a kick out of it all right," I said. Why not twist those words to *Mom'll kick me out?* Anything could have been coming down the tracks to me. That summer was a locomotive.

Our return to the house seemed longer than the stroll down, sun setting fire to our backs, our feet dredging up three months worth of dust. Between us two we'd finished the Cokes, and Brian insisted on carrying the cooler with nothing but the sunfish and melting ice sloshing around. I let him. It was his catch, his badge of honor. We didn't talk. Even Brian sensed breaking the quiet would shake what we'd so far built. I wondered how much longer before he lost his exuberant, flat-out welcome embrace of the world's every minute. I knew I had the power to squash him.

The roof we ducked under spared us from heat and light. Lorna kept our house a cave. That summer held few favors from her, but that one I appreciated.

"You go wash off the bug spray," I told Brian as he ran through the front hall to the kitchen.

"Mom, look," he yelled.

Yeah, just look. Across from each other at my kitchen table, sat my wife and my lover, sharing Sunday morning coffee instead of church, so look-alike dark and pretty—they could have been sisters.

Lorna peeked into the open cooler and applauded Brian's catch; Heidi put her head beside my wife's and cooed, both showing off more for me than for Brian. I was fucked. Here was my special circle of hell.

These two had been meeting like a pair of witches over a brew pot ever since July 4th weekend when I stood along third base during one of Brian's Little League games, giving Stevie Schroder the steal sign, when, above Stevie's batting helmet, I spied Heidi folded in half on a bleacher one tier up from Lorna.

Fuck. I couldn't think on that field past *fuck*. Heidi sat folded, chest to knees, as she leaned her mouth into my wife's pony tail in the conversational way conniving women have. The intimacy showing on her face surpassed any I'd found in Lorna's hair those last months.

I brushed my right forearm, then my left, tugged my ear lobe, lost the sign in the omen of two women cooking my goose. I'll admit I'd had a few slugs from the flask I keep in the Bronco's glove compartment. In addition, Barry bought for the dads who helped him out a couple rounds of what the concession stand had on tap when we were putting the kids through batting practice. So, it could have been the accumulated buzz as much as it was the shock of those girls buddy-ing up and eyeing me like a bug they intended to tear the antennae from.

We'd made it to this particular Sunday August morning, which meant Heidi hadn't seen fit to spill the beans yet to Lorna. It had been a month of my dashing between the two of them, and I'd been sliding, I thought safely, around the bases. But I suspected now, with all of us here, we were heading for the kind of brawl ESPN televises every fifteen minutes. I was dealing with evil twins who shopped together at Shoe Carnival.

The sunfish was beginning to stink. Lorna closed the lid of the cooler.

Brian said, "What should we do with him?" He got a gleam in his eye. "Eat him?" Boys, they're always interested in blood and guts.

Lorna said, "Honey, by the time we skin and scale him, there won't be enough to fry up in a pan for one of us." My wife could show decency when required.

Bri's voice wobbled. "Keep him?"

"How, Buddy?" Squatting down to his level made my knees crack. I felt the girls look at each other behind my back, comparing my shortcomings in that telepathic way they'd mastered. "Mounting him on a wall plaque? Taxidermist wouldn't be worth it for one small fish." I felt ashamed saying the word "mount," and like a slime for calling Brian's catch "small."

I could see my stupidity sting him. He recoiled and edged closer with the cooler to Lorna's gorgeous knees.

Besides her cooing, Heidi hadn't spoken, but now she threw back her shoulders to lift her breasts. Outside of our bumbling parenthood, she was prepared to be the voice of reason.

She extended her arms—for Brian or the fish or the whole fucking world, I couldn't guess—but Bri stepped back. He wasn't one for hugging strange women. I thought: *He'll grow out of that.*

"This guy's probably done for, sweetie." Heidi's voice dripped syrup and sympathy; her one hundred percent heat trained on Brian like she was a klieg light. "But I, for one, would be honored to give it a proper burial."

"What?" I sputtered. "You're gonna dig a hole in the burned-out grass back of your apartment?" Heidi, with a yard tool? She'd chip a nail in the first two minutes. And I'd never seen her break a sweat, except over me.

Lorna asked, utterly calm while her eyes burned, "Now, Jason, how do you happen to know Heidi's lawn's condition?"

I said to Brian, "Stop knocking that cooler against your leg, you'll get bruised." When do kids ever stand still?

Heidi pouted. "I'm just offering."

Lorna and I locked eyes. Our bullshit radars were working overtime.

"We'll put him in *our* backyard," Lorna said, ready to fight for the fish grave. Her teeth were bared, revealing that overbite with all its tiny ridges.

Ever see those television nature shows where two she-lions fight over and tear into prey to feed their offspring? The kick of it: what Lorna and Heidi snarled over *was* the offspring, both jealous and guarding, hungry for—no—*famished* for love, and sniffing it out among the family tree's lower branches, among the most tender shoots.

And then there was me, always determined to act the horse's ass.

"Bring the cooler out back, Bri, and I'll meet you with the shovel."

Heidi piped up: "I got a shovel."

What didn't she have?

Lorna said, "Do tell. Where? In your purse?"

"Back home."

"Then maybe you should go get it."

With those two marking their territories, I fled to the cool and silent garage. I just wanted to lie back, to let my skin soak up the grease-stained concrete, to close my itchy eyes, but Brian heeded my directions, and I could see him wicking water from the bird bath with a stick, the cooler at his feet. The fish wouldn't get buried without me. Lunchtime would never come and I was a hungry goddamned beast. I had a fleeting remembrance of the Grab Ass frog legs, their tender meat. Lorna and Heidi couldn't resist one-upping each other and banding together to beat me down to my knees until we put Bri's catch underground.

Lies suck. We were about to muffle the Gun Lake moments my boy and me had shared under dirt, just to keep the peace between his mom and my girlfriend. We might as well not have trudged through morning fog, or baited hooks with tiny pieces of corn, or let the sunrise catch us by surprise the way it did so finely that Brian had said in a droll, grownup voice I'd never heard out of him before: "You forgot to tell me I needed sunglasses to fish." Like I was his buddy. And I, for a little while anyway, didn't want him to think otherwise.

I'd taken my shades off the top of my head and set them on Brian's nose, tucked them in at his ears so the ends disappeared into his hair. He kept hold of his reel while I bared my bloodshot eyes to the daylight chinking up the lake water into a thousand crystals. I'd be lying if I said there was no pain in any of that. Then Brian snagged his fish and we vaulted clean into our reason for being there.

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Heidi retreated in the deep north woods of the U.P. once she learned I never intended us a permanent thing, which is what she came to realize when I was teaching Brian how to dig so deep dogs and raccoons wouldn't raid what we'd soon lay to rest.

Meet Heidi and Lorna, my lovely assistants in this magical endeavor—*See how the shovel never leaves his hands*. The girls held iced tea in frosted glasses from the fifties that me and Lorna had picked up at an estate sale. They stirred sugar in the tea with old-fashioned swizzle sticks—again from a fifties cocktail party set—like in a goddamned Rock Hudson movie, selecting ice cubes from a metal bucket with itty-bitty silver tongs. I worked the sheltered ground of a wild-growing honeysuckle off the right of the patio, which held all our outside celebrating materials except the alcohol—tiki torches, a cushioned glider, tray tables, bar essentials, smudge pots, bug spray. My assistants walked over, in their matching espadrilles, to pitch their two cents' worth. Sweat beading up on their drinks dripped into the dirt I was punching with a shovel. Hitting clay, I had to kick the blade clean more than a couple times.

"Deep is what we want," I told Brian. "Once it's buried, we want it to stay buried. If scavengers find it, it's all over. It's a goddamned mess, is what it is."

Brian nodded. I guess he'd resigned himself to the fact his fish would, literally, bite the dust.

Heidi said, "What grade you in, Brian? I mean, when school starts."

"School" mentioned in August might as well be profanity swore from the rooftops, and the last thing, I bet, Brian was thinking. Lorna and me, we knew better, but Heidi, clueless Heidi, childless Heidi, tubes-tied

Heidi, stood wilting in the heat, trying to make friends with Brian on account of she was fucking his dad. Made me almost love her. Made me almost want to murder her.

Brian said, "Third." He spat at the ground. When the hell did he learn to do that?

"Man of few words," Heidi said, "just like his father."

"Watch it," I said. The digging was taking it out of me. I could've eaten a whole pig. The vodka had long ago spilled from my pores. I was stone sober. "Lorna, why don't you two go in and fix us lunch, some ham sandwiches or something? I bet Brian's hungry, aren't you Bri? I'm starved. And it's plain nobody's interested in eating fish." I laughed, but I laughed alone. "Am I right?"

The girls kept mum, their attention on their iced teas, and still managed to come out smelling sweet. Only nine years old, but Brian had already learned selective forgiveness. Then his and my eyes connected and I saw a little of the love we knew leak away.

I stood hungry and lightheaded, and confused over two close-by women whose bodies I knew better than the back of my gritty hands. My boy collapsed to scratch his ankle, then hauled off and hit me with the cooler as I bent for maybe the last ceremonious dig.

I took a knee like a football player, faked the injury some, though the cooler had done a sharp number on my shinbone.

Brian giggled, kind of out of his mind, out of his league. What was this? He could beat up his dad and get away with it? He was willing to sock away. This time when he swung the cooler, I caught and grabbed his wrist, his bones like twigs tensing inside his skin. The cooler wobbled some in his grip, but it was his weapon against me and he held on.

"What? You're gonna hit your old man when he's down?" I was joking, trying to save us, but it just wasn't happening.

His eyes mimicked the steel Lorna's had given me earlier. For the first time that day, I felt the ground shift. The teams were uneven.

Lorna said, "He has every right to belt you, you unfeeling asshole."

In my heart I thanked her for speaking, even if she was badmouthing me, because her words sprung open the moment so we could all slink away for repairs.

Lorna, the good witch, went to catch Brian in her arms, while I shook off the water from the cooler and absorbed the stink of the sunfish growing old.

But Brian smacked Lorna's grabby hands and ran, screaming, "Leave me alone."

Heidi said, from her non-parental perch, "Good job, you guys."

The kid wouldn't have known what to do once we opened that cooler anyway. He'd have hated to stand there humming some kind of *Taps*, his mom and his dad and this lady who'd invaded watching as he wiped at grimy tears with the back of his wrist. Tears that would ambush him, the way I knew they could, rendering a man unable to swallow past his own spit. He wouldn't want to be caught dead.

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Not the world's greatest fisherman, so what knowledge I had, I passed on that summer to Brian before I moved out in September. Somebody else taught him to fly-fish, the next guy Lorna married, or maybe some high school or college buddy from the university we sent him to in Minnesota—Land of 10,000 Lakes. What chance had Gun Lake against the drama of that glacier-torn topography?

For Brian, I don't know how it is because we never talk of it, but me, any morning I can conjure the lip of our lake rising so the fog loses definition in the curve of the land's sneer, until all's wet, sky and water are one, and we're soaked, too. Houses, docks, and hundred-year-old trees root in the muck of boggy inlets set to tangle up a skiff. Gun Lake both rises and deepens, it bleeds its banks, turns monstrous, it overtakes the world, it's as furious and full of splendor as Lake Superior, as the English Channel, as the Mediterranean

Sea. But its skin, like a man's, can be pierced with the right barb and lifted by a tensile line worked by just the right boy, the boy that matters. The day we buried the fish in our old backyard, Brian may as well have peeled off my coat and left me in a blizzard or shaved ten pounds of my flesh.

Donna D. Vitucci, who mostly hates speaking of herself in the third person, is a grants writer and development associate for local non-profits in Cincinnati, OH. When she isn't finagling money from flush foundations, our intrepid writer spins stories by the light of her laptop, beside a burning candle or two to summon the good juju. Her fiction has recently appeared or is scheduled to appear in *MO: Writings From the River*, *Pequin*, *Diner*, *Storyglossia*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, and *White Fish Review*, among others.

"My favorite front porch is actually the side porch of the two-family house where we grew up. Since the downstairs family 'owned' the house's front door, they also got dibs on the 'front porch.' The entrance to our second floor was from the side porch, a small, enclosed-on-three sides space one step up from the driveway. This porch had the smoothest, coolest cement, cool on even the hottest Cincinnati day. Our friends called us out from there with sing-songy voices: 'Oh Donna, Oh Denise!' Our noises, when we played Barbies and jacks on the porch, echoed. I like to imagine the concrete absorbed our voices, our childhoods now part of the porch as beetles are part of the amber that preserves them."