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Rookie

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Rookie

I've always loved animals: the scaly slither-ers, the bumpy-backed ribbit-ers, the hippity-hoppin-escapees that my older sister intentionally set free; the stick imitators, the slow-moving-quick-biting snappers, the sun-bellied swimmers. When I was four, my mother bought me my first bug catching kit. I spent hours stalking and pouncing around our yard. My first "pet" was a woolly bear named Bob. He was a fuzzy black and brown noodle in my palm. I'd wake up each morning and rush to his little wire cage to see the new munch marks he'd made in the leaves I poked through the wooden slot.

I grew up imitating Steve Irwin and Jeff Corwin. As I'd walk around the yard, I'd talk over my shoulder to an invisible camera crew, breaking down and dramatizing each catch. By the time I turned eight, I was more interested in reptiles and amphibians than bugs. I had no fear of snake bites. I was more seduced than Eve.

They were quicker and more dangerous than bugs. They would coil up and put on their mean mug when my hands entered their personal bubble. They would taste the air, my lingering particles. They would flatten or puff up their speckled bodies, like they were trying to impress the prettiest girl in their grade. They would open their mouths and reveal the pale pink danger of their fangs.

And I would think, *the game is on.*

They would strike at my left hand and miss. My right hand either pinned down the back of their head, or if I was feeling particularly cocky, I'd just go straight for the tail and lift them up in front of my face before dropping them into a five-gallon bucket. I'd give them grass to hide under or sometimes even try to feed them a frog. I was fascinated by their unfused jaws and winding, malleable bodies.

When I wasn't holding a butterfly net or plunging my hands into muddy pond scum after frog legs or a meandering water snake, I was casting out my worm and bobber. Some of my earliest memories are of fishing. I can remember receiving the "As seen on TV" Rocket Rod for one of my birthdays and being thoroughly disappointed, as I spent most of the day trying to untangle the bird's nest of fishing line blocking the barrel of the rocket.

When I was about nine years old, my mom's side of the family all decided to rent a cottage on Conesus Lake for a week in the summer. It was only about fifteen minutes away from our actual house, but we spent the nights there anyway. I spent the whole week fishing off the dock. I must've gone through five dozen worms, and I'm sure their black bile guts were stuck under my nubby fingernails the entire week. My cousin Mitchell, who was about twelve at the time, and I hauled up sunfish after sunfish. I think we kept count, something like fifty rings a bell (though I'm sure we padded our numbers a smidge).

But a boy can only be satisfied with sunfish until he wants something with a little more oomph to swallow up the nightcrawler dangling off his hook. About halfway through the week, my mom's best friend Tim came to stay at the cottage, too. They had been friends since college when they both attended Mansfield. Tim came from a long line of Marines—Pennsylvanian thoroughbreds. To me, he's always looked more like a woodsman than a military man.

He was a mound. He stood at about five foot seven, but the width of his shoulders must have verged on three feet. His shoulders seemed to constantly be encroaching upon his neck. His beard was white, which matched the traces of hair that grew on his mostly bald head. His face was round and bore a vague resemblance to Santa Claus. His cheeks were plump with pronounced ridges of smile lines leading up to his straight and full nose. His eyes were downturned and humbly brown. You'd be hard pressed to find him in an outfit that didn't feature some camo garment.

When he arrived at the cottage, he found me fishing off the dock. He grew up flipping Smallmouth out of the Susquehanna, or fly fishing for trout in mountain fed streams. He asked me what I'd been catching.

"Mostly sunnies," I told him in a high-pitched voice I can no longer recall. "They keep taking my worm, though." He knelt on the dock and stuck his index finger into the white Styrofoam cup of worms. He dug out one of the translucent brown strings and kept it pinched between his thumb and index finger. He put out his other hand, beckoning for my pole. He grabbed the line and then the hook.

"Look here. You take one end of the worm and insert the hook into it, then you run the hook straight through its body, up its guts." He shoved the hook into the crown of the worm's head, or tail; I didn't know. Then, he

dragged the hook through half the length of the worm, so that the worm rode all the way up to where the hook was tied to the fishing line.

“Then you put the hook through the worm three or four more times and keep wrapping it around the hook. This way, the sunfish can only pick at it, but they won’t be able to take the whole thing. Here, give that a try.” I watched as the inky guts coated his fingernails too.

It worked like a charm, but I still couldn’t hook into anything bigger than a sunfish or a bluegill. I came close to catching a catfish, who sat lazily at the bottom of the water column brushing his belly against the sand, but he wouldn’t bite. By Sunday, I’d had a great week at the cottage, but I couldn’t help but feel disappointed that I didn’t catch a single bass. As my family spent the morning cleaning and packing up, I ran out to the dock to try one more time.

After a few more small bites, Tim ventured out to meet me on the dock. “Any bites, Connor?” I told him just a few, as I gawked longingly into waters that have always felt ethereal, mysterious, and dangerous to me. It was then that I felt a tug on my line. My body felt an excited jolt for a moment, but when I saw the sunfish dangling from my hook, my shoulders slumped. I was so disappointed that I didn’t even finish reeling the little sucker in.

I let him tug my line one way, and then another, as he desperately tried to shake me off. He tired himself out after a while though, and he eventually just hung suspended in the water column, slightly sideways, perhaps with a cramp.

It was then that a dark green, football shaped shadow lurched out from the protection of the dock’s underbelly. It seemed to scream towards my tuckered-out sunfish, opening his mouth into a massive O. The football inhaled the sunfish in one lunge. My body froze, but Tim was right there yelling, “Set the hook!”

I jerked the rod up towards the sky suddenly, feeling a new weight taking out my line. I didn’t really know how I was supposed to “set the hook,” but I suppose I had seen people do this on TV before. I also didn’t really understand how I was supposed to hook the bass if my hook was already in the lips of a sunfish. But, I felt his weight on the line and I knew: *the game was on.*

He bucked like a bull. He drove his head downwards, shaking it side to side. He jumped like a dolphin into the humid air, then splashed back into his dominion. I reeled him in, all the way to the dock’s edge, before the line went slack and he spit out my sunny. My shoulders too went slack as the tension of the moment evaporated amidst the July heat.

“Awh! You had ‘em!” Tim yelled, as he clapped me on the shoulder and laughed with his belly. “He must’ve been close to a five-pounder!” The game was over. I had lost my big bass, as he once again turned to a dark shadow and

disappeared into the green shade of seaweed. I reeled in the sunfish, popped the hook from his puckered cheek, and tossed him back.

I stared at the ever-shifting, shimmering water, possessed by the secrets of a submersed world.

As I entered my teenage years, I was less preoccupied with bugs, reptiles, and fish. I spent most of my leisurely time on video games. None of my best friends were into fishing, so I lost touch with it as I got older. I no longer possessed my prepubescent energy and wading through skunky pond water just to catch a snake became rather unappealing to me as my body inched through my chrysalis years.

Of course, I loved video games, but they were ultimately used for escapism. I sunk hundreds of hours into the yearly installments of *Call of Duty*. I donned the cowl in the *Batman: Arkham* series. I leaped from crashing trains, planes, and sinking ships in the *Uncharted* series. I protected a little girl named Ellie from fungus-faced clickers in *The Last of Us*. I was evading myself in these digital worlds, even if I was having fun all the while.

As a late bloomer, my body remained skinny and muscle-less throughout high school. My body was nothing like Batman's. I began to lose interest in sports because my body refused to grow. I gave up on having a first kiss, or a first girlfriend, because I thought I was too skinny to be attractive to any girl, even as girls in my grade asked me to the prom. In the mirror, I saw Connor the way nobody else did. My self-hatred trumped my desperation for romantic or sexual relationships.

When I graduated from high school, I hoped college would solve my problems. I hoped that my roommates would like video games too, or maybe they'd listen to Eminem or Kendrick Lamar, or maybe they'd love baseball, or maybe they'd teach me how to be loved.

But I hid me. I never tried to talk about video games, or hip-hop music, or sports with my roommates or classmates. The social exposure of college pushed me further inward. It became new fuel for the recluse. After one year of roommates at a little community college, I decided to transfer to SUNY Geneseo and move back in with my family.

But there were times when I would try to make a break from myself. Most of these early attempts included excessive consumption of alcohol for a one-hundred and forty-pound nineteen-year-old.

I didn't have my first kiss until I was nineteen. She was a friend of a friend, who I met at a college party. Someone had told her that I hadn't had my first kiss yet. This intrigued her. She was so curious as to why I hadn't kissed anyone. She treated me like an alien, like she was going to be the first human girl to kiss this new exotic species. Of course, her inquiries only made my

heart race faster and, in turn, exacerbated my thirst for gin. But still, I was too nervous to kiss her. With the music blasting, she'd talk so close to my lips that I could smell her perfume, her hair, and it all made me want to drink myself to sleep.

She wore tight jeans. She had bold blue eyes and dirty blonde hair. Her name was Sam. I wanted to kiss her, but it was impossible. There was no part of me that could risk the acceptance of pleasure. Eventually, when we were both drunk enough, she just pushed me against the wall, pressed her lips to mine. "You did good!" she told me.

When she ghosted me the next week, I decided to take up drinking alone in my bedroom late at night, once I was certain my family had all gone to bed. As my relationship with alcohol became more intimate, my relationship with myself became more violent.

I had long ignored my despondency until it slashed me across the forearm. Then, I began hunting a new game: pain.

It was an idea long before it was blood on bathroom tiles; I had listened to Eminem talk about it on "Stan," with furious intrigue: "Sometimes I even cut myself to see how much it bleeds. It's like adrenaline, the pain is such a sudden rush for me." When I first heard this song at eight years old, I wondered how pain could be a rush. I didn't understand this idea right away. It happened gradually. As my teenage years slowly passed and my body seemed to experience puberty latency, I began weaving my cocoon not out of silk, but thorns. I kept shrouding myself in memories that hurt keenly: my grandpa's dilapidated rib cage being hugged too tightly by his skin; my older sister being tossed into a stack of firewood by my father when she was twelve; my cousin speaking at his own mother's funeral when he was just twenty-four; my baseball coach belittling me on the field: "You're ninety pounds soaking wet!"

I saw no reason to take it easy on myself.

When I couldn't love myself, I hurt myself. I would dig out the bottle of gin or vodka I kept stuffed in a backpack under my bed. I took shots from the bottle until I felt my head get a little too heavy for my neck. Then, I'd stuff my pocket knife into my hoodie and wobble to the bathroom with my headphones in. I sat on the toilet with my knife in my right hand and my phone in my left. I'd drafted a playlist for those moments. I wanted immersion.

It was a rush. I hated how alive it made me feel. Every cut felt like waking up from hibernation. I could see my life outside myself. I could touch the lukewarm slickness that kept my life living. I wanted my outsides to match my insides. I wanted to be scarred and I wanted people to think of me as scarred. I was gnawing at my chrysalis, cutting my gums on the barbed fibers holding me in place.

When I was a boy, if I wanted to catch a snake, I dove headfirst after its fleeing tail. As I entered adolescence, I forgot how to take that dive. I'd unlearned how it felt to pursue even the most fleeting glint of happiness. Once I realized that I wasn't living for myself, but rather for those who might mourn my death, I knew I either had to figure out how to want more of life or put an end to my own.

I asked for therapy and received it, though my parents had little to say to me about my cutting. For months, I'd drafted suicide letters in my head, but I was too chicken shit to leave any kind of paper trail before I was truly ready for the deed itself.

Instead, I chose therapy and a serotonin reuptake inhibitor.

Within a year, I had stopped cutting and started loving again. Some days, I could hardly go an hour without thinking about suicide. I approached the end of my undergrad degree at Geneseo wanting to enjoy my final semester. I found someone who helped in that regard. She was in my graduating class and wrote short stories. We talked about my cutting and her eating disorder. She told me she'd just left a shitty relationship, and I told her that I was still a virgin. She didn't treat me like an alien. Instead, she asked me if I wanted a teacher.

So, we raced against the countdown of our final spring semester at Geneseo and tried to give as much of ourselves to the other while we still could. She ran her fingertips over my scars in her twin bed and kindly asked me not to cut myself again. She said it quietly, like I might be offended by her love. I told her I'd try.

When we graduated, she went home to her small town outside of New York City. I stayed in Geneseo. We talked a lot at first. Then less. Then we didn't. We were together briefly, but fully. Ironically, she taught me much more than I imagine she intended. I learned that I wanted more of life: more hugs in snowfall, more words to taste, more cities to see, more rivers to wade, more awkward goodbyes. More. I was thankful for my scars, but I wanted to keep my promise. I wanted to treat myself with the same kindness she had shown to me.

I hadn't seen Tim in nearly a decade, but it was during that summer after I graduated that Tim invited my family to stay with him in Pennsylvania for a weekend. I was a little anxious to meet him again. I wondered what he would think of the me I grew up to be. I feared that the Marine would think me weak if he noticed the scars on my arm.

We packed into my dad's truck on a Friday morning. It was early August, and I was just about to start my graduate degree. I'd bought a fishing pole earlier in the summer and was struggling to recapture the feeling it gave me

as a little boy. To be frank, I realized that I sucked at fishing. Tim assured me there'd be plenty of fish to catch at his place, though.

He was retired and lived alone up on a mountain in the Nippenose Valley. After a three-hour drive, we pulled into his gravel driveway. His house was more of an estate than a house. It was long, almost like a warehouse. It was his, but it was also his brothers' hunting vacation home, too. There were about eight different bedrooms upstairs, and in total, I'm sure the place could sleep thirty people. But it was just us and Tim for the weekend. Well, and his chocolate lab, Bo.

We had a campfire on Friday night, went to bed early, and rose early the next morning too. We drank coffee next to his twenty-foot antique shuffleboard table, underneath the mounted heads of trophy bucks. Tim had an entire trophy room, which featured everything from pheasant, to entire taxidermy bears, to rattlesnake skins—all killed on his property.

"So you ready to fish?" Tim asked me suddenly.

"Yeah, in the stream?" I asked back.

"Sure," he told me.

"My mom and I walked it this morning, and we didn't see any fish in there," I mentioned.

"Oh, they're in there," he said, as he beckoned me to follow him into the garage. He handed me a fly rod. I'd never used one before. He grabbed a white container of worms after he put on his vest. Attached to the vest were nail clippers and fishing forceps; clippers he used for cutting the fishing line and the forceps for removing the hooks from the trout's mouth.

He walked me to the stream's edge. It was only about sixty-five degrees under the canopies of eastern hemlocks. The stream vibrated louder as we approached its edge. The stream is natural, but Tim designed holes every twenty feet or so, which act as perfect homes for brook trout. Before the trip to Tim's house, I'd never even heard of a brook trout.

"Some are natives," he began as he slid the hook through the worm's guts just as he'd once shown me. "They'll be most of the smaller ones. They're usually darker too. Their colors are slightly different. The big ones are stocked. They should be hungry today, though. I haven't fed them in three or four days."

He demonstrated the awkward dance of fishing with the fly rod in the stream: with your left hand, you control the line. With your right, you control the rod. However, the rod was about seven and a half feet long. I was constantly snagging my rod tip on branches just out of view above my head. It felt like learning how to use a prosthetic limb.

When I finally made a decent enough cast into a hole, right where the stream dove over a horizontal log and formed a mini-waterfall, I felt my rod tip dip downwards. Tim looked over my shoulder: "Set the hook!" He called

from behind me. I yanked my right hand up with a jolt and sent my hook and mutilated worm into a branch. I was a little overexcited.

Tim just chuckled behind me, “What a rookie!” and then he gave me the heartiest of pats on the shoulder, nearly knocking me down the sloped bank of the stream and into the water. I laughed along because I was alive to see myself fail at least one more time. I laughed because I was learning, and failing, and growing to be more alive and more in love with this stream, these trout, myself.

And for a moment, I wished I had fallen into the stream; to be fully submerged in the frigid water, fully submersed in its translucent plasma. My chrysalis would soften, and I would let the trout nibble at the shedding skin peeling off my kneecaps and pinky toes. I would look up at Tim through the ripples, and watch him toss pellets to his pets, and I would be new.