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White Sturgeon

by Westley Braswell

Storm clouds brewed over the ocean and poured across the sky towards land. The water rolled over the rocky banks of the bay. Sea breeze whistled that old timer's tune across the stretch of beach. A busted up old sign that welcomed people to Coos Bay was half buried in the sand and served as a bathroom tray for the seagulls. The handle of a fishing pole dug into the sand. Ten feet tall, with a massive spool and thick line.

Malcolm sat in the chair, next to a tent pitched about twenty feet away. He checked his watch, and settled in. Nora, her black hair tied up into a bun, stood beside him.

"You all set up, Malcolm?" Nora said.

Malcolm shrugged. "I mean, I think so. Not sure what else I need." He looked out at the stretch of water between the two beaches. "Nora, you sure he's here?"

Nora smiled. "Bumpy likes this stretch. Especially if a storm's coming in. It brings food."

"Why do they call him Bumpy?"

A large white sturgeon, ten feet in length, sprang out of the water a hundred yards away. The fish sailed through the air, then pierced the water and slipped back into the depths, out of sight.

Nora pointed to where the fish entered the water. "Because he does that a lot. Sometimes he bangs against people's boats. And the ridges on their back make a 'bump' sound."

Malcolm focused on the water. "He's the only one big enough to qualify?"

"There might be others, but the lawyers said ten feet, and the only one confirmed to be that length in Coos Bay is Bumpy."

Malcolm nods his head. "Bumpy it is, then."

"You got any idea why Dad wanted you to do this?"

Malcolm shrugged. "Whatever Dan's reasoning was, it doesn't matter. I just want to get this over with."

Nora looked down at Malcolm. She patted his shoulder and turned away. "I'm gonna get us something to eat. Keep an eye out for Bumpy. If he leaves, we've got to follow him."

Nora walked away towards her car, parked on the sand. Malcolm watched her leave. When she got into her car and drove away, Malcolm reached into the backpack next to his chair and pulled out a notebook. Leather bound, with yellowed pages and faded writing.

He opened the journal and flipped through. Near the back end of the notebook was a page titled, "October 17, 1997."

We said our goodbyes, and she left today. I didn't think it would be that hard. A child was never in our plans, we both agreed on that. What was I supposed to do? I can't tell if I'm doing the right thing or not. Will he be better off with me, or without me? He looked at me, right before she drove away. He looked out the window and stared at me with those big eyes of his -

Malcolm slammed the journal closed and threw it into his backpack. He looked back out at the water. All was quiet on the bay.

###

Nora drove back onto the beach. She stepped out of the car carrying fast food in her hands. She looked out and saw Malcolm, who gripped the rod and yanked it up.

Malcolm yanked up on the rod and laughed. "Got you, asshole." He turned around and saw Nora walking towards him.

Nora raised an eyebrow. "Oh, did you now?"

"Been wrestling with him for nearly an hour. What took you so long?"

"Stopped by the lawyer's office to let him know I was out here with you." Nora set the food down next to the chair. "You think you got it, don't you?"

"Guess I'll be heading home sooner than I thought."

Nora smirked and watched as he struggled. Malcolm pulled in more line. The top of the fish broke the surface.

"Got you!" he screamed.

He pulled in more line to reveal the fish. A three-foot catfish, who looked rather confused by the whole ordeal. Malcolm's jaw dropped. Nora burst out laughing.

"Oh yeah, you got him alright." Nora walked over to the catfish and pulled the hook out of its mouth.

Thirty yards away, Bumpy breached the surface of the water, sailing through the air before breaking the water again.

Malcolm frowned. "He's taunting me."

Nora smiled. "Yeah, he does that."

Bumpy jumped up from the water once again. Malcolm studied the fish and caught a glimpse of Bumpy's right fin. There were scars and tears covering it.

"What's with all the scars on Bumpy's fin?"

Nora shrugged. "Might have been a shark attack. Can't say until we get a closer look."

Malcolm pulled the line back in. He reached into the cooler, pulled out another chunk of dead fish, and re-baited the hook. He took it out to the water's edge and cast it out into the bay.

"This your first-time fishing?" Nora asked.

"Yep."

Nora scooped up water in her hand and poured it over the catfish. "You'll learn quickly. I didn't start till I was fifteen. Dad said was a fast learner."

Malcolm sat back down and pulled out the journal from his backpack. Nora stepped into the water, holding the catfish below the surface.

"Is that one of Dad's journals?" she said.

"Yeah, I grabbed it from the house." Malcolm looked up. His face turned sour. "Oh, sorry, I should have asked first."

Nora waived him off. "Nah, nah, go right ahead. You have a right to know what he thought." Nora lets the catfish go. It bolted from her arms back into the water. She walked to Malcolm's tent and grabbed a towel.

"Find anything that helps?" she said as she plopped into the sand next to him.

"Nope."

Nora looked up at Malcolm. His eyes lost themselves in the pages. "Okay then," she said.

"You sure your boyfriend won't mind you blowing your day off like this?"

"Ah he'll be fine. He's been dying for an excuse to invite his friends to a party without me around. He tried to act all broken up about it. It was kind of cute." Nora smiled. Malcolm kept his focus on the book. Nora reached up and patted him on the shoulder.

"You okay?"

"Doing just fine." Malcolm turned a page.

Nora sighed. She snatched the journal out of Malcolm's hands and stuffed it into his backpack.

"What the hell?"

"That's enough of that for now." She zipped the backpack up and moved it away from Malcolm. "Tell me about yourself."

Malcolm leaned back in the chair. "Nothing to tell, Nora."

"Well that's just not true." Nora sat there for a while, then smiled. "Tell me about your mother."

Malcolm sank into the chair. "My mother?" Malcolm thumbed at the fishing pole buried in the sand. "What about her?"

"Your mom was going to college when she met Dad, right?"

"She wanted to be an actress. Theatre, mostly. She was a bit of a thespian back in her day. Hell, she still is."

Nora perked up. "Well, how'd that turn out?"

"She's currently unemployed and worked at a call center for fifteen years. After her last husband died, things sort of fell apart."

Nora sank back down to the sand. "Oh."

Malcolm looked down at the ants burrowing into the sand. "Yeah."

The line on the fishing pole moved. Malcolm and Nora snapped their heads to look at it. More line pulled out of the spool. The gears creaked and scraped. Malcolm tentatively took the rod in hand. He looked out at the vast blue of the bay.

Malcolm jerked the rod upward. The pole bent at a huge angle, and Malcolm stumbled forward. His body began to fall forward, when Nora wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled him back. He kept his footing and held tight onto the line.

"Damn, he's strong." Malcolm said as he tried to get his feet to anchor him against the sand.

"Ten feet and four hundred pounds of pure muscle." Nora held Malcolm's waist in her arms. "This is going to hurt."

"Just make sure he doesn't pull me in." Malcolm gritted his teeth.

Malcolm held his balance, pulling in line whenever there was slack. For two hours, he and Bumpy battled. Nora held him whenever he tried pulling Bumpy in. The two of them went back and forth, line pulled on and off of the spool. The rod creaked, and Malcolm's joints grew red with the strain, but his hands never left the pole.

Bumpy breached the surface of the water only ten yards from shore.

"Get ready, he might be saving his energy for one last bolt." Nora grabbed ahold of Malcolm. "If you hit your head, I'm not gonna be able to pull you out."

"Just get ready to help me pull him ashore." Malcolm's eyes focused on where the line met the water. "I got him."

He held his breath. His arms jerked upwards again, pulling in line. A dark shape began to form underneath the surface of the water. Malcolm pulled harder. The ridges of Bumpy's back broke the surface.

"Yes!" Malcolm gave the line one last pull up.

A sickening whip of air sliced through the air, as the line snapped in two. Malcolm and Nora fell backwards onto the beach. Nora grabbed at her nose and pushed Malcolm off. Malcolm stared up at the sky, unmoving, unblinking.

He sat up and saw Bumpy breach the surface of the water. Up he went, and then back down, out of sight.

"You pulled the line too hard. You're lucky it didn't whip around and hit you in the face," Nora said with a nasally whine, as she held her nose closed. "You clocked me in the nose."

Nora sat up and looked out at the water. "Damn. We'll have to wait until he's hungry again." She looked over at Malcolm. He stared at the sand in front of him. He was breathing erratically and shaking.

Nora shot up and ran over to him. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "Malcolm, you need to calm down, okay?"

"I had him. I had him. I had him." Malcolm stammered and clutched himself. His eyes were wide open and bloodshot, glassed over like shark's eyes.

"Malcolm, snap out of it!"

Malcolm looked at Nora. His breathing slowed. He gazed out at the water.

"Screw this," he said.

He stood up, grabbed his rod, and walked towards the tent. Nora stood up after him.

"What?" she said.

"Screw this, I don't need it. I'm going home." Malcolm opened up the tent and threw his fishing pole inside.

"What, you're just going to abandon this whole thing?"

"Why I am out here, busting my ass, to make one old dead man happy?"

Nora sighed. She reached out a hand to grab Malcolm's shoulder. "Malcolm, he's your dad..."

Malcolm span around. "No, he's not!"

Nora stopped. Her hand trembled as she looked at Malcolm, his face twisted. Malcolm walked past Nora and grabbed his backpack and chair. He threw them into the tent and turned back to Nora. Tears welled in her eyes.

Malcolm stopped. "Nora, I'm..."

Nora cried. Malcolm walked up and hugged her. "Hey, why don't you head home? I'll stay the night out here. Tomorrow morning, we'll get right back at it."

Nora shook her head. "The family will want to see you. They want to get to know you."

Malcolm shook his head. "They can get to know me later." He reached out and hugged Nora. He patted her on the back and strolled back to his tent. "Good night."

Nora nodded, and walked to her car on the beach. Malcolm watched her leave every step of the way. A loud splash made him jump. He turned around to see Bumpy breaching the water, flailing about like a mad fish, before landing with a thump.

Malcolm glared at the fish in flight. "Asshole."

###

Malcolm sat alone in his tent, an electric lamp lighting up the darkness. He sat up in his sleeping bag and flipped through Dan's journal. He flipped to the very last page, dated "December 12, 1997." He studied the page carefully. His eyes focused on every word and line. Suddenly, he threw the notebook across the tent, towards the box of fishing supplies. He screamed and started shaking. The box fell over with a crash. Malcolm looked up at the box.

He got up and put the box right side up. As he dropped in a container of lures, he saw something at the bottom of the box. A manila envelope. Written across the top was, "Malcolm."

Malcolm took up the envelope in both hands. His hands trembled as he ripped open the top of the envelope. He reached inside and pulled out a stack of polaroid photos.

He gasped. There, on the first one, was a man in his thirties, smiling up at the camera, with tanned skin and a mustache that looked like it belonged in the seventies. And right next to him, with his arm over his shoulder, was a small child. Wearing a bright yellow shirt and the

dumbest jean suspenders that could be bought on sale at Penny's. The kid looked confused and held out a hand towards the camera. There was a small birthmark on his right hand.

The tears came down hard, as Malcolm flipped through the photos. They all were in the same place, taken at the same time. A beautiful day at the beach. In one image, the little boy cried after the man stuck his face in the sand. For a brief moment, the man was gone. And the boy screamed out for the man that he couldn't see.

Malcolm looked back in the envelope. There were more photos and a piece of folded paper. Malcolm unfolded it with care. It was a letter, written with a shaky hand and stained with water.

I'm wish that I could have given you the world for all the time that we lost. But all I can give you is what I left behind. This is my only chance to give you something other than money.

Do you remember our first day at the beach?

Dan

At the bottom of the letter was another photo, taped on. The man and the boy stood in the water. The man was kneeling down and holding on to a fish. A huge white sturgeon. The little boy stared at the fish with awe painted across his face. All along the fish's right fin were scars and tears.

Malcolm shook. He clutched the letter and the photos to his chest, as if he was trying to dig them to his heart. He closed his eyes tight and cried. Cried until the tears would come no more, and all that was left was himself, spent, lying on the ground of the tent.

A sound broke the peace. The sound of splashing water. Malcolm pulled himself up with great effort and stepped outside the tent. Lit by the pale moon, the black water of Coos Bay

shined like stained glass catching the dawn. And sailing above it all, Bumpy leapt into the air, hanged in space, and slid back into the depths.

Malcolm dug his feet into the sand. He took in the night air and set his eyes on the end of the beach. There was a rocky outcropping, at the base of a small cliff. He looked back out at the water, and then returned to the inside of his tent.

###

As the sun rose over Coos Bay, Nora drove out onto the beach. She stepped out of her car and looked around the stretch of sand. Malcolm was nowhere in sight.

"Malcolm?" she called out. "Malcolm." She looked down the beach to the cliffs that bordered each end. Malcolm was there, along with most of the equipment.

Nora walked over to Malcolm. "Hey, Malcolm, what's up?"

He tossed a spool of wire towards Nora. She jumped and caught it on reflex. "Get a hook, weights, and bait on that as quick as you can."

Nora looked down at the wire, then up at him, her face flustered. "Gee, no 'hi' or 'thanks' first. I mean I get you don't like me, but I'm trying to help-"

Malcolm looked up at her. "Nora, I like you fine. I like you better then fine. Now, I've got four more of these to do, so will you please help me?"

Nora sighed and reached down into the tackle box. She then looked up at Malcolm's work. There were three lines of wire wrapped around rocks that stretched out into the bay.

"This isn't going to work," Nora said, "you're not going to tire him out on a line before he rips or pulls the hook. The rod gives you a give and take. If Bumpy's got something to pull against, he'll pull it."

Malcolm worked on setting up another spool of wire. "We'll just have to pull him in before that happens then."

"How?" Nora looked at Malcolm's set up. She saw the heavy-duty gloves that he had on his hands. Her eyes shot wide and she stood up. "Oh, hell no!"

Malcolm looked up at her. "What?"

"You are not going to hand fish this, that is way too dangerous with fish this big. If a line gets around your hand, he might amputate it, or pull you in and drown you."

"Well, if I die, the rest of the will goes to you, so I guess it works out fine on your end."

Nora's hand whipped through the air, and slapped Malcolm across the face. His cheek stung red, and he turned to her. She glared down at him.

"You think I care about that? At all?"

Malcolm sighed. "I'm sorry, Nora. That was uncalled for."

Nora sat down beside him. "Damn right it wasn't."

The two sat there and let the sea breeze sing that old-time tune.

"Dan pulled in Bumpy. I was here when he did it," Malcolm poked his gloved hand into the sand. He lifted up a pile of it and clutched it. "And he'll be here when I do it."

Nora looked up at Malcolm. She smiled and patted him on the back. "Well, get me some gloves then."

Malcolm looked at her. "You don't think I can handle this by myself?"

"Nope."

"I agree. Get that bait on the line."

###

The two of them sat on the rocks where their lines were tied. The breeze blew across the water, and a fine spray misted off the tides. They pulled and pushed in a dance that created the coastlines. Places where worlds meet, and life finds new ways of being reborn.

One of the lines jerked. Malcolm and Nora jumped into the water and each grasped the wire. A strong tug nearly pulled them both off their feet.

"Yep, that's Bumpy." Malcolm braced himself against a rock. "I'll pull, you wind the slack around the rock."

Nora stepped back a couple paces. "Your hands are going to hurt like hell doing it this way. A rod still would've worked, you know."

"Not fast enough." Malcolm set his sight on the point between the beaches. "This ends today."

So, it began. Malcolm pulled with all his might whenever he felt slack on the line. When Bumpy pulled, he gritted his teeth, and pushed with his legs against the rock. Nora pulled in the slack and slowly wound it around the rock. Malcolm's body took the brunt of Bumpy's strength. His back screamed, and his legs burned with acid. Underneath the gloves, his skin blistered and bled.

He never took those hands away for a moment.

Malcolm wound in a new bit of slack for Nora. Her hands bled as well, but she grabbed the line and pulled in the new slack. The line jerked, and Malcolm's foot slipped. He fell back into the water, the line now wrapped around his arm. He screamed out in agony.

"Oh my god," Nora ran to Malcolm and tried to brace him. "I'll get the wire cutters, Malcolm, just hang on."

"No!" Malcolm screamed, and pushed against the rock with his leg. "Just pull some slack."

Nora looked to the supplies and shouted in frustration. She grabbed the line in front of Malcolm and pulled with all her strength. Enough slack came in on the line for Malcolm to slip his arm free. She dropped the line and checked his arm. There was a ring of blood where the line pulled. Malcolm gripped his arm and moaned in agony.

"It just broke the skin, it didn't cut any ligaments." Nora helped him sit up against the rock. "We should still get you to a hospital."

He shook his head with a grunt. "No." His face drained of color and his body shaky, he looked up at her. "I can finish this."

She helped him stand up, and the two took their positions. Malcolm pulling in line, Nora winding it. Malcolm vomited from the pain, but he fastened himself against the rock, and fished on.

The two pulled in the line, bit by bloody bit, for nearly five hours. Bumpy's strength bruised and battered both of them. But, eventually, the line became easier to pull in with each tug. And as the sun took its place in the noon sky, Malcolm and Nora pulled their catch into the rocky outcropping. A ten-foot white sturgeon, with tears and scars on its right fin.

The two of them finished winding the line into place and stood in the water beside Bumpy. All three of them were worn out and spent, and they rested against the rocks. Nora smiled at Malcolm, as she sat across from him, leaning back against a rock, Bumpy in between them.

"You caught him." Nora patted the spiny ridge on Bumpy's back. "I'll be damned."

"We caught him." Malcolm rubbed his hand against the side of Bumpy's head. "He's beautiful."

Nora nodded. "If you take him back into town, you'll be a local hero among the fisherman."

"And a pariah to the tribal council, right?"

Nora shrugs. "Eh, my boyfriend is one of the people sitting on it. I'm sure he could pull some strings."

Malcolm shook his head. "Just the photo."

Nora got up and went to the equipment. She came back with an analog camera. She washed the blood of her hands in the water, then held the camera up.

"Smile."

Malcolm shook his head. "You get in here too."

Nora shrugged with a playful smile and sat in the water next to Malcolm. She held the camera away from the two of them. They both smiled.

Click.

Nora set the camera down. "Beautiful." She looked down at Bumpy, who was looking up at her with his big black eyes. "Should we get him back in?"

Malcolm rested his head against Bumpy. "Let us rest first."

Nora stood up and walked to the equipment. Malcolm and Bumpy rested on each other, supporting each other as they rested in the water. Malcolm held Bumpy with one arm, and smiled, closing his eyes.

Slowly, Bumpy started swimming around the outcropping. Nora and Malcolm held him and walked him around the cove. Until the three of them made their way back to the bay's edge. They let go, and Bumpy went out into the bay, sinking into the water.

"Your- my father would have been proud." Nora wrapped an arm around Malcolm's shoulders.

"I think he would be too." Malcolm sighed, and let his eyes follow the beach.

With a surge, Bumpy broke free of the water's grasp and sailed through the air. He caught the noon sun against his skin, his ridged back and scarred fin breaking the line of the horizon. He then fell back into the water, returning to his home.