

Taste of July
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The snowless, melancholy of March came silently and calmly. April rolled, May sang, in the halls of wildflower meadows. June hummed, both with the high-pitched vibrations of gnats, making loop-de-loops around the ear, and with the whirl of June bugs, lazily hovering towards streetlights and illuminated windows. Now it was July, and the corn sweat out in the country was starting. The cornfields, now well taller than me, seemed to be releasing water vapor into the air like a boiling pot of water. The humidity, amplified by the corn sweat, was the most intense I'd ever felt. My skin was damp, not from sweat, but from condensation. My wet skin tugged against my clothes, creating uncomfortable friction. However, I tried to give my damp skin no attention. I had a task to do.

Miller's pond. An average farm pond, a bit west of Des Moines. It was owned by a friend of my grandfather, and I had been fishing in it since I was a toddler. Now I was 10, enjoying my summer, unaware that in 9 months, the Ides of March would unleash COVID upon me, changing my life forever. The pond was about four acres in size, bordered by cattails and populated with thousands of bluegill, as well as a few bass and catfish. It was these inhabitants whom I was after. My grandfather had promised my cousins and me that for dinner, we would eat whatever fish we caught. All my other cousins had caught a fish, and to be the only one who hadn't would be a huge blow to my young ego.

It was late afternoon, and the sun was beginning to lower. The light made the water glimmer with a blinding intensity. I saw peculiar things when I stared out at the glittering water. The sparkle of the shining pond seemed to float into the sky after a few seconds of staring at it. The sparkling water then began to bend and float in the sky in ways of utter impossibility. A large boulder sticking out of the water a few feet from me seemed to hover into the skyway, quivering and shaking as it went, before being picked apart and disappearing from vision. The boulder was then followed by the trees on the other end of the pond, outlines of themselves rising above their canopy, like the soul of a dead man floating away from his body. The tree outlines bent around each other in odd motion, moving like implausible jellyfish, the blue of the sky being their ocean. They then slowly faded from vision. I rubbed my eyes, mirages were the strangest.

The wind picked up, deep breaths of air opened cottonwood seedpods, and the thin, white, fluffy fibers floated through the air like a summer snow. They glided into the water, where they accumulated on the shimmering surface. The sun was growing lower, I had to catch a fish now, or accept my inferiority. I tried to remember all the tips and quips given by my grandfather over the years.

I recalled him saying a few years ago that "On hot summer days, the fish get hot too, they either find shade, or swim to the bottom". Quickly, I looked around the pond and spotted an old, decaying deck that went out about 20 feet into the pond. I ran over to the deck, got down on my hands and knees. The rough wood of the deck dug into my skin, its texture being one I did not enjoy. I looked down into the green water. Through the glare, I could make out the shape of a

bluegill, lazily swimming in circles. I quickly cast a hook with a worm poorly wrapped on it, expecting an eager response. One minute passed, then two, then five. I reeled the line back, stumped.

The wind was still roaring, harsh July gales created waves in the prairies, stirring up beetles, grasshoppers, and other odd insects. The wind awoke the barn swallows, whose muddy, clay-like nests were situated on a nearby shed. The swallows twisted and turned in the air, circling each other as if in a chaotic dance. They swooped down near the tallgrass, eating bugs straight from the air. The gales kept roaring, swaying the grass and nearby cottonwood canopies. The sound of twigs rustling, grass stems bristling against each other, and small waves in the pond (created by the wind) licking the shore had a certain cadence to it. Like a breath. The land was breathing. Between two large posts, an orb-weaving spider of some type had constructed a large web. The web swayed in the wind, catching several of the disturbed insects. It swayed with a certain cadence. Was the web breathing? Near the dock was an old flagpole, the flag long having been lost. It was covered in lichens, blue and orange splotches of life. The wire at the top swayed in the wind, making a tattletail sound, as the sun edged closer to the horizon.

All these tiny sounds, which I usually would barely notice, were combining and interlocking, creating a symphony, the wind being the eternal conductor. The natural instruments were not breathing; they were singing. And in this song, there was a faint whisper. A whisper I couldn't quite fully comprehend. Every time I tried to grasp onto it, like a fish, it flapped and jerked, making me lose grip.

Fish. I needed fish. It was then I remembered another thing my grandfather had told me, "The key to most problems, often times lies invisible, right in front of your pupils." I looked back towards the barn swallows again as they feasted on the insects disturbed by the gales. I looked down at the spiderweb, as the arachnid feasted on the insects disturbed by the gales. And then, a rush of realization hit me, like a river overflowing its banks. I ran over to the prairie's edge and pushed open the tall stems of grass. After a few seconds of searching, I found a small grasshopper. I grabbed it with my thumb and pointer finger. Between my two fingers, it kicked and struggled, before releasing out of its mouth, a copper colored vomit, which stained my palm. The secretion made my skin feel tingly, like I was being gently pricked with a needle. As if several mosquitoes had landed on my palm, and were now driving their spear-shaped mouths into me. The secretion smelled of decay and tobacco, imprisoning my nose and brain for a few intense seconds. And then the gales blew the smell away, and my mind became my own again. I ran back to the dock and pulled the worm off my hook. The worm smelled of earth and thunderstorms, and I needed to take a second for the gales to blow the scent away again. After recovering, I fixed the grasshopper onto the hook and cast it under the dock. As I did so, I noticed the multitudes of crickets, mayflies, and grasshoppers, which had been blown into the pond. Smaller insects, such as ants, attempted to use the larger insect's corpse as a raft to escape the pond's reach.

My hook sank slowly into the water, and after not even 5 seconds, I had a bite. Anyone who's ever been fishing can tell you that bluegill fight like a fish three times their size. It took me about thirty seconds to land the creature. As I fought it, the handle of my small pole dug into my arms, leaving a bright red imprint. At last, however, I got it onto the dock. My hands were tingling as I did so. The bluegill was a female, evident by the subdued colors; however, in the dying sunlight, she still glistened like a diamond.

That night, my grandfather filleted the fish, using an oddly curved knife to separate first skin from the body, and then the muscle from the bone. Flies swarmed the pile of fish guts

discarded nearby, making it look like a pile of coals. My grandmother then cooked the fish fillets on the stove, with a little bit of butter, salt, and pepper.

When dinner was finally ready, I eagerly grabbed a chunk of meat from the fish I'd caught. It was hot, greasy, and slippery in my hands, disintegrating across my palm as I squeezed it. I eagerly put the meat into my mouth. It tasted of milky butter, overbearing salt, and intense pepper. But more than that, it tasted like glittering waters, open prairies, and the conductor of wind. But even more than that, it tasted of independence and success.