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Sitting on the edge of the dock, she used the blade of the slip joint, now jiggling precariously in its handle, to dig the splinters from her fingers. The tip of the knife barely sunk beneath the surface, leaving vertical tracks of split translucent skin down her hand like gills on a fish. She was more careful with the knife now, grabbing the worn, rounded heel instead of the hilt, where the wood was cracked and splitting. Finished, she flipped the blade back in its sheath before snapping it out again, a nervous habit she had seen her father repeat. *Snap, retract. Snap, retract.*

The lick of lake water against her bare toes startled her. It must have rained last night, she mused, for the water to rise to this level. A torrential downpour, surely. She vaguely remembered flashing lightening and claps of thunder, or perhaps just the spark of exposed wiring from a cracked light bulb, hot to the touch, and heavy boots down creaking stairs. Snap, retract. She peers down

over the edge of the dock. Definitely a thunderstorm. The deep blue was a stark contrast to the stagnant brown from weeks of uninterrupted drought.

The lake was quiet, as it was yesterday, and the day before that. Most of the houses dotting the waterfront were empty now, their fair-weather inhabitants finding refuge where the bitter stench of rotting algae and vulture carcasses couldn't reach them. They didn't know what they were missing, those flighty tourists. The way the lake seemed to take a shuddering, gulping breath before a storm, how its entrails spilled over the banks during a flood, tendrils of algae and fish skeletons littering the pebbled shore. It was life and death and the intermingling of each. It was magic. She breathed it in. The cold morning air stung her chapped face, and she smiled at the memory of a similar quiet morning.

She was so small; her arms had trembled from the weight of the pole and the fish at the other end. Her father steadied her with his hands on her waist as she hoisted the catfish from the surface, disfigured and bulging from a recent meal. It seemed to seize in midair, its body whipping in a fitful frenzy. The hook, dug deep in the creature's jaw, was caught at a peculiar angle, forcing the mouth open in a silent scream. *Grab it tight*, he told her, *but avoid the spines. They'll slice you right through.* Her

father handed her his slip joint. Every angler worth his worms knew to skin the fish while it still squirmed. *The longer it's alive, the fresher it tastes.* Gripping it tightly in one hand, she pinched the neck where her father taught her, briefly paralyzing the fish so she could hold it by its muscular tail. She had looked up at her father, who nodded approvingly.

She was small, but her stomach was made of steel. Kneeling down, she laid the stunned fish on the dock, flipped open the slip joint and sliced the head clean off. A pool of deep red stained the wood. Immediately, the body started to jerk wildly. Her father had laughed. *It's dancing for you!* and she giggled. After it settled slightly, she grabbed the fish again in her tiny hand, pushing it firmly down on the dock. With her other hand she fingered the knife tightly, finding the right grip. *Slide the blade tip—first near the tail, just under the skin. Wiggle it around a little.* Biting her lip in concentration, she dug the knife under the smooth gray skin, relishing the sight of her blade pushing up underneath the thin folds until the tip of the knife poked through. *Now position the blade horizontally at the base...move the fish, not the blade...nice clean cut.* Ribbons of silvery skin trailed to the ground like apple peels. Finally, the fish stopped twitching. *Not bad for your first time, chicklet.* If he had only been paying

attention, he would have been so proud of her technique last night.

The dock has been cleaned dozens of times, by coarse brushes and soap, and by rainwater, but she still sees every mark, each stain. Perch, pike, sunfish—each left a distinct shade of red on the weathered wood, imperceptible to all but her. Her fingers, raw and bleeding from her rough ministrations, traced the grooves of the wooden planks, rubbing the blood into the grain.