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McKenzie Miller

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Daddy Wanted to Teach Me *McKenzie Miller*

That heavy summer day, before Daddy had to go cut Mr. Ferguson's grass and trim bushes, we snuck through our back woods onto a neighboring golf course. The sun incubated a stubborn moisture in the atmosphere – not quite fog, but it made my skin drip and feel far too close to my blood. The air brooded; it was like the day was waiting for something to bring it crashing around our feet.

We set out to feed our family of three and half (with Mama pregnant with my little brother-or-sister, she needed more than either of us). Daddy carried a crude bamboo cane with fishing line and a bubblegum pink Barbie Girl fishing rod that he had happened to see in one of his customer's garbage cans in the city, still in its packaging. We didn't have any fancy tackle or lures but Daddy wanted to teach me how to eat.

The angry weather had scared off all but the most determined golfers so we were mostly alone. The pond we were fishing was covered in a mucky layer, prompting Daddy to ramble on about algae blooms and El Niño and how the liberals were full of shit but global warming might exist because it was too damn hot out here. The cloying stench of dying fish slithered through the heavy air and put meaning to the too-big words he was throwing at my tiny head.

"If the fish are dead, why are we fishing?" I asked.

"Some of them are still alive and they're dying with the algae in the pond. It's easier to catch them like this."

I'm still not sure he believed his own reasoning, but he couldn't tell me then that we couldn't afford even the dollar-brand hot dogs without buns and Grandma's borrowed ketchup to eat that week and pay bills. So he made it a tactical game – catch the fish when they are weak.

"Just remember to watch out for turtles. They don't breathe water like the fish, and they don't turn loose like a fish either". I didn't hear, focused on swatting the algae with my pink reel, full of energy even though I hadn't eaten a real meal in weeks.

Daddy tried to teach me how to cast my line, how to watch for bites, how to reel it in. I quickly grew bored and he grew angrier with each of my tiny, throaty sighs. I was released from his lessons by a bite on my line. I shrieked and jerked my rod wildly, not having paid attention to anything Daddy had told me. He took the rod from me and smiled a huge chewing-tobacco smile, said it felt like a good catch.

He hoisted our trophy from the slimy pond only to see a yellow-bellied slider struggling against the hook lodged in its wrinkled throat. Daddy threw the rod and screamed at me.

"I told you to watch out for the damn turtles!" His face flushing a dangerous near-purple, he pulled out his pocket knife and pushed it into my hand, careful even in his anger to keep the blunt end facing me.

"Your mama won't be able to cook this," he said, and I thought I heard his voice break on the final word.

"You have to take care of it." He spat, turning away.

I studied the turtle's struggle, eyes burning, and realized there was no way to

get the hook out without the creature biting me. I looked to Daddy for guidance, but he wouldn't face me.

I pressed the knife to the turtle's wieldy throat and dragged it across in a quick, sawing motion. The little thing's struggle was quick and feeble. Its shell was covered in hot, sticky blood and my hands had tiny scratches from its final rally. If I hadn't held the final result in my dirty, shaking hands, I could have almost pretended that I hadn't done it. Daddy only wanted to teach me to eat, instead he taught me how to give up on a lost cause.

Sea Child *Annalise Eberhard*

Whenever I pick spinach from my teeth,
I remember green, translucent webbing
and her salt-frosted hair hanging low and wild
as she sang of watery freedom.

She would greet the morning sun on sea-slimed rocks,
diluting her jagged memories in dying waves
and praying water-logged worms would bury her secrets
in their hidden world under the sand.

I pulled her back to bed with me
and held her close under our patched family quilt—
never letting her leave my protection
and the safety the land provided her.

Slowly, I fell in love with her wind-blown movements,
craving her dry bread and over-seeped tea
as I ignored the neighbor's raised eyebrows and frozen stares—
Because she made meaning of my life.

When she found her skin again, she slipped inside the sea,
consumed by the cold, unforgiving waters
that both gave her life and stole her life from me.
and I am left alone on the rocks. Waiting.