The Best Catch

LuAnne Larsen*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1975 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Best Catch

by LuAnne Larsen
English, Senior

Jake said it was a fine day for fishing. Just enough breeze to make a person feel good and just enough sun to keep warm. The lake was large enough for lots and lots of boats and sometimes there were speed boats that came real close to them. Then Jake would have to shout them away. Shout at them so they could be alone.

They returned to shore soon after landing the big catfish. Jake ripped him open without so much as really looking at him first. A full, round body and bulging eyes was all Tom had gotten to see before Jake strung him on the line, tied it to the oarlock, and tossed him over the side of the boat.

"Big one, he is, boy. Make good frying," he said. He had gotten excited when the fish bit and had forgotten about Tom for a moment.

"'Bout the biggest I've seen in a long time. Hey boy. You remember the time I told ya about when me and Charlie Hoover and Ben Taylor went down to Crystal Springs? We sure caught some big ones that time, and got our limit every day, we did. Why, we wasn't out but . . ."

Tom nodded his head to show that he did remember that story. He was looking for the catfish and could hear it flipping softly behind Jake's seat. The water splashed around its heavy barb and every so often a little glazing pool would appear at the surface. It was a good fish, but Tom wished he had caught it.

Jake was talking again and he saw that his eyes were shining. A kind of glare really. He had seen those eyes only a couple of times before; once when he had been fighting with Tom's mother and had stormed out of the house. He was drunk and didn't come home until the next afternoon.

[ 10 ]
"I'm gonna fry him up right, boy. Best damn mudcat I've seen in a long time." Jake took fresh bait and balled it up in his hands. He was careful to see that each prong was covered with just enough of the sharp black meal before throwing the line into the water.

"I'll get us another one, boy. Bigger this time, too."

Tom looked at his line and saw that it still hadn't gotten a shake. He brought it in to see if he, too, needed fresh bait. No, the liver was still there.

A half an hour brought no more fish so Jake lifted the morning catch out of the water and stuffed him in the side of the boat. "Good six or seven pounder," he said.

They pulled up close to the dock and as soon as Tom could catch hold of the end of a board, Jake stood up and snatched the fish from its hiding place.

"Ooh—wee! Look here, boy. He's still a flippin'. What ya think of old Jake's prize here? Ain't he a grand one?"

Tom got a closer look now and he could see where the hook had gone through the gill. He heard his mother call to them as Jake stepped out of the boat and started running up to the cabin.

"Got a good one, Fay! Plucked him outta the water just beyond the dam. That pole a mine sure takes a fine catch. Had it since I went to Crystal Springs last year. Can ya see? Big one he is. Go get the frying pan out here."

Tom tied the boat to the dock, real firm, like he had been taught. Jake was really enjoying himself and it looked as if his mother was pleased. He lifted the tackle box and poles out of the boat and turned in the direction of the cabin. Jake was almost screaming now and he had walked back towards the dock and stopped.

"Bring them jackets up now, boy. Might rain tonight and that'd be all we'd need. Some patrol dick down our throats."

Tom looked in the boat and saw the life jackets still fastened together, stuffed under the seats. He'd have to make two trips.

"Go on, get your ass in gear, boy. I'll have lots for you to clean up here."
It had been sort of fun out on the lake. Jake didn’t say much except to tell him when to move or when not to. He had caught a bluegill right off and wanted to save it to show his mother, but Jake had just laughed and yanked it off his hook with his pole before he could object. He thought his mother would have liked those pretty colors.

He hadn’t minded getting up so early either. That was what fishing was all about, although he’d only gone once or twice before with Uncle Harold and his three boys. It had been kind of exciting getting up today. He could feel the cool Missouri air coming through the window by his bed and it had given him the chills when he stepped on the floor in search of his old slippers. His mother never woke up, but he was sure she had said something to him as they left the cabin. Just a whisper, he thought.

They were hungry now, for the sun was just beginning to reach its highest point. Tom could smell his mother’s bacon cooking and he wondered if there would be coffee cake for later.

Three years was a long time. He remembered how his mother had talked about Jake. Told him Jake would take him places and do things with him. And they had done things together, but usually the three of them, and then Jake would talk to his mother mostly. Jake even told him stories, lots of stories, but now he never stayed at the dinner table long enough to hear the end of most of them. Never heard nothing but old hunting tales and about the times Jake went fishing.

He heard other stories, too. Ones about how Jake had had a real fine upbringing, a good start, only to be floundering now in booze. Every word about Jake’s fine upbringing made him sick. So what if he was born into money? Money had no hold on Jake’s manners. His mouth, neither.

It always seemed to Tom that Jake tried awfully hard to make good in front of his mother. Always brought her flowers and candy, and sometimes he let her drive his big car. His mother liked him, all right. Tom could tell that. She was always talking about the good times she was
having, and about how nice Jake was to her. And then one day he saw Jake kiss his mother. After that, he came over a lot more often, and his mother said that one day he would stay. They would all have lots of fun, she had said then.

And she had been right, at least about Jake taking them places sometimes. But he remembered other times, times when it didn’t seem that Jake was so nice. He could remember one time in particular. One time soon after Jake had married his mother.

Tom had just come home that day and had pulled off his jacket and tied it around his neck. He was wet from the knees down and he had felt something cool and sticky on the side of his face. It was in his hair, too, and he tried to brush it out with both of his hands. He could see Jake playing cards in the living room and he figured Jake must have seen him come in before he could get his jacket off, because he was slapping the cards real loud on the table.

"Tom! Git in here, boy!" His voice was rough and it sounded as if he’d been drinking.

Tom peered into the living room and saw that Jake was still sitting at the card table. He hadn’t expected him to be home so early. He really hadn’t expected him to be home at all. He untied his jacket and threw it on the hall steps.

"Yes, sir. What is it?" He walked into the room and stood next to one of the nicer chairs. He hoped Jake hadn’t noticed the "sir" bit. He was tired and wanted to be left alone.

"Boy, you been to that quarry again? Your face is all smeared up."

"Yes, sir. I’ve been to the quarry." There was a beer on the table in front of Jake and Tom saw three empty cans on the stand by the couch. He took off his shoes and saw that they were wet and gummy. Slushy, really. He would catch hell for sure now. "Been here all day?" he tried.

"Boy, you better watch that tongue. You’re in my house. Well, what ya got to say for yourself? Ain’t I told ya
never to go to that quarry no more?'' Jake got out of his chair and pushed the card table to one side. Too hard a push, Tom thought. He was a bold man. Big, and not at all handsome. Tom couldn't figure what his mother saw in him.

"I was just watching the men, that's all. I didn't get in no trouble, or anything, sir.'' Jake stood directly in front of him now, nis huge red face glaring down at him. Tom wished he had gone right upstairs instead of coming in the living room. He wished Jake had gone to work today, too.

"Boy, I ain't gonna go through this thing all over with ya. You're old enough to know better. Ain't ya?"

"But sir, I was just . . ."

"Don't 'sir' me. You was just nothin, boy.'' Jake had been drinking, and that hand was on him before he could raise an arm to shield himself. But instead of the blow it looked like Jake was going to deliver, he had taken his hand and placed it on Tom's head.

"Now, boy. You can't keep going to that old quarry. It's just too dangerous. I told ya to wait until you're a couple years older, and then I'll take you there and we'll talk to some of those men. I don't want you going there no more, hear?"

"Yes, sir, but I just thought that if I was real care­ful . . ."

"No. I told you to wait! Now, if you want to go and watch with me, we'll have to stand way back. That's the way it'll have to be."

"Then we can go? I mean, you'll take me sometime real soon? Do we have to wait until I'm eleven?"

"You go on, now. Clean yourself up. I'll take you some day here next week. Only if ya promise never to go back on your own."

"Yes, sir! I'll promise. We can go next week and then I can talk to that big guy who gives the orders. He's the boss, I think."

"Get on upstairs now, boy. Get that stuff washed off your face."
Tom had remembered that day so well. Maybe because they did go to the quarry, or maybe because just the two of them had gone that day. And now it was the three of them on a fishing trip together. A "family outing" Jake had called it last night. Now Jake had taken him fishing. Taken him fishing after all the stories he’d heard.

"Boy, get this fish cleaned up! We gotta get that boat back before two, ya know." Jake was shouting at him and he heard something about old newspaper out back and beer and ice. He was thinking about his bluegill again.

Once out in the boat Jake had helped him with his hook and had even cast out for him the first time. It went real far, but he didn’t get a bite for the longest time. Then he had a fish, and it felt like a big one. He had to brace himself up against the side of the boat a little and then he gave the line a hard sharp pull. Jake yanked the pole out of his hands for a moment and he was shouting for Tom to stand up.

"OK now boy. We’ll have to get this fella set again. Didn’t quite do it that first time. Can ya take the pole now and hold it real tight? We’ll get er yet, boy. Don’t you worry."

It was a big fish for sure, but they lost him and Jake had to bait his hook up again. Then he threw the line back into the lake and it went further this time than the last.

"Leave it alone now," Jake had said. "Don’t be jerkin or you’ll scare the fish away. Keep that pole off the side of the boat and watch your line. Don’t want it tangling up in no reeds. Take your time and wait patient. Never hurt to sit and wait."

Tom had wanted to have a good time and forget about rules and rights and wrongs. Besides, Uncle Harold had explained all that stuff to him and he knew what to do. So what if he couldn’t sit so still? He had gotten that bluegill, and all by himself, too.

He could smell the catfish guts as he bent down to scoop them into the newspaper. A dark mushy substance mixed with the dirt and made a kind of paste that stuck to
Sketch

his hands. His fingernails were filthy and they smelled of oozing worms and seaweed. Jake had had to use his knife handle to kill the thing and Tom could see where the blow had landed. He pushed the head onto some fresh paper and looked to see if the eyes were open or closed.

Breakfast was really good. His mother had made coffee and the aroma mixed with the scent of bacon. There was a cake, too. His mother had put on a bright green cotton dress, one of his favorites, and had fixed her hair in a way he had never seen before. It looked nice, he thought. She gave him plenty to eat and Jake spoke to him only once when he had spilled his milk. But she had hushed him. Given him more eggs and coffee.

“‘How did you do today, Tommy. Have a good time?’” His mother was smiling and she seemed happy. He thought about the pretty bluegill and looked at the catfish bones on his plate.

“‘Didn’t have much luck. Just an old bluegill, Mom.’” He looked across the table to Jake. He was still picking at the fish with his fork and there was a big grin on his face.

“‘Musta been all a six inches long, Fay. Wiggly little fella, too.’” He took a drink of his coffee and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “‘Lake’s full of those things, right boy?’”

Tom managed a weak smile and turned to his mother. She was still thin and pretty, just as she always was when his dad had been home. She had a thick mound of reddish hair that was usually parted on the side, but today she had it tied back behind her neck. What Tom liked best about her was her voice. He could tell a lot about her by the way she talked.

When she spoke to him her voice was low and soft, and sometimes he had to listen real close so he could hear every word she said. When he had done something wrong and knew she was mad, he could see her teeth, a little yellow now, flashing at him. Her voice was sharp then and she would talk in quick little sentences, pausing only to
catch her breath before going on. Usually she didn’t scold too long, and she never hit him.

Then there were the times she’d talk with Jake. Privately. He had heard them many times at night when he was in his room. Loud voices. Dull sounds and then harsh shrills. He knew what they talked about, but it still surprised him to hear his mother so cold and hasty sounding. Not the little reprimands he had gotten at times, but loud, bold statements that made him almost frightened.

“Shit, Fay. The boy is such a mouse. Needs a good slap once, I’d say, and you’re the one should give it to him.”

“I will not have you speaking such a way around here, Jake! My son’s been through enough the way it is. Isn’t his fault . . . course he still loves him . . . time . . . don’t pressure . . . too young . . . between you and me.”

She always sounded directive and forceful when she talked to Jake, so he usually listened to her when they weren’t arguing. He had a cold and mean sound to his voice and Tom was glad she never spoke to him that way.

When his mother had first married, Jake had given them both lots of presents. “Just for you, boy. Just for you,” he’d say. And Tom liked the things Jake gave him, all right. It was just that there was always so much.

Jake took his mother out to dinner and shows, and they went shopping an awful lot. It was nice for his mother, he thought then. She wasn’t used to so many nice things. They didn’t get presents much anymore now, but Tom didn’t care. He would rather have worked puzzles with his dad at night like they used to before Jake came around.

Tom was just starting to get good at those puzzles when his dad left. His mother said he’d come back and play sometimes, but he only did once. Divorce, she had said. Too many things making me unhappy. Me? No. A little man now, son. You will learn. Everybody learns
something. Takes some people longer than others, that’s all.

Tom remembered that her voice was soft and gentle then and she had kissed the top of his head when she saw that he was starting to cry. She had sat down beside him and put her arms around his small, tight body.

“‘Come on, we’ll put a puzzle together. It’ll be fun.’” Tom looked into his mother’s eyes and saw that she had been crying, too. She was red in the face and her hair was all messed up. Cold. She was cold, really.

“‘NO! I don’t want to play with you.’” His words caught in the back of his throat and he could feel his stomach getting tight. He had gotten angry at his mother for telling him things he did not want to know. Things he hoped were all wrong.

He clinched his hands into round little balls and pushed them into his mother’s shoulders. “‘NO, NO, no, no, NO! Why did you say those things? My dad won’t leave me.’” He was blubbering and had pulled away from her hold and stormed up the stairs to his room.

“‘You sent my dad away. Why? We played puzzles, not cards. I hate them. I hate you. I hate you! I hate you! . . .’”

Jake said that puzzles were just for kids. “‘All I every play is cards, boy. Cards is for men.’” And Jake had tried to get him to play once, but Tom had gotten mad and confused about all the rules and had taken his favorite puzzle up to his room instead.

Then one day he saw his mother playing with Jake and he decided to give the cards another try. Jake had to talk real slow at first and explain everything so he could understand. He wasn’t very good, but after a while he could almost beat Jake at crazy eights. When his mother played, Jake would always win and then he never felt like playing with Jake, until they were the only ones in the house on Saturdays.

Jake must have been talking for quite some time because his mother pinched him on the leg and told him to listen up.
"Well, boy. Whada you say? Got another day here so might as well make the best of it. Catch another bluegill tomorrow?" Jake laughed.

"Come on, Tommy. Finish your eggs. Got cake here now, so eat up." She smiled at him. A good, full smile. He wondered why she didn't smile like that all the time.

"Sure. I guess I want to go. I... I like to fish I guess." He really wasn't too excited about another outing like today's. He knew Jake would probably just lie around in the sun drinking beer the rest of the afternoon, and then they would all go home again tomorrow.

"Well, then. Finish up those eggs and then help your mother here while I go down to see that the boat's all in order to turn in. Get those life jackets up to the cabin all right?"

Tom had forgotten. He'd just wanted to eat breakfast and talk to his mother. He wasn't used to carrying life jackets and poles at the same time and he had forgotten.

"I forgot the life jackets and I just had..."

"Well then, git down there right now and I'll help your mother here. I still haven't told her how I landed my catfish."

His mother nudged him a little and he got up from the table, and walked toward the dock. Jake was going to tell her about his catfish and he had wanted to tell her about the pretty bluegill. But Jake had laughed. Laughed right out loud.

Fishing hadn't sounded too exciting to him last night. He would have rather gone to the quarry and spent the whole day talking to the men. But his mother said they were going some place and Jake said it would be fun. Maybe if he could snag that big fish he had almost landed this morning. Maybe he could get excited about that fish, just like Jake had gotten excited about his catfish. Then he could tell his mother and she would smile that smile again.

Tom looked out on the lake and saw that there weren't so many boats now. They had probably all gone in to shore
with their morning catch, too. He had to crawl down into the boat to get the life jackets and when he had gotten back on the dock he saw the stringer that had been tossed under a seat. He thought about his bluegill again and then about the catfish. Maybe Jake wouldn't laugh so hard if he caught that big fish tomorrow. Maybe he wouldn't even laugh at all.