

Jack's Passage

By Wilmot B. Irvin

CHAPTER ONE

The boy woke with a start. His mother's gentle announcement – "Your grandfather is here" - had broken into his slumber like a thunderclap. He threw back the covers and jumped from the bed. It was a Saturday morning in early May, before the changes. The fish were guaranteed to bite: the boy's grandfather had promised him, and this made it so. The boy was eleven.

Last night the rain had pelted the dry earth, forming rivulets and running down the slope of ground behind the boy's house and into the creek. This caused his father to predict even greater success than the boy had otherwise anticipated for his first fishing trip of the spring. "It'll activate 'em," his father had said during supper, encouraging the boy to go to bed early and get plenty of rest. "You'll need all your strength tomorrow," the boy's father had opined, his expression a mixture of wisdom and hope so convincing to the young fisherman.

The boy jerked off his pajamas and reached for the shorts and shirt that lay on the chair next to his bed. His feet were in his best fishing shoes before the boy had finished buttoning his shirt.

"Grandpa," he yelled. "I'm coming!"

The old man smiled his slow, full smile of pleasure that had as its source the boy who loved him with a love that was at once innocent and complete. The boy's mother poured coffee from the percolator, observing the smile as it made its way to the old man's eyes. "You take care of Jack, Daddy."

The fishermen set out. The sun was just making its way into the trees, silhouetting their branches against the clear morning sky, and the ground was still wet and cool. The old man's car smelled of tobacco and pecans and other things the boy associated with his grandfather, things no one else was connected to, things

found on visits to the old home across town his maternal grandparents had occupied for half a century. Jack studied his grandfather as they drove, observing his familiar ancient features. With his wrinkled, spotted hands the old man gripped the steering wheel like a skipper holding fast to the helm of a ship in storm, and all the while he whistled softly a tune from Jack's earliest memories.

They stopped for bait and coffee. Jack wasn't allowed to drink coffee at home, but his grandfather pretended not to know that and allowed the boy a styrofoam cup filled mostly with cream and sugar. The old man chatted with the store's proprietor as he would with an old friend, casually but intimately, the way he talked with Jack's father on the back porch of the old home.

"Charley, we're off to catch the big one, the boy and me, and while we're at it, we might as well fill our bucket with some of those plump bream. Will you come with us?" he asked, as sincerely as anybody. But Jack knew Charley would decline, and off they would go, just the two of them, on this first fishing trip of the spring.

The sun was climbing over the old mercantile store now, and the day promised much as they drove west and then north, to the place Jack loved - the place his grandfather loved too.

The pond was still and clear, reflecting the freshly green gum and hickory which stood around its banks like fishermen waiting silently for their catch, dumb and stolid as men bent to a single purpose. The cabin sat patiently on the hill overlooking the pond. Quietly they unloaded their gear, taking care not to disturb the pond dwellers, and Jack could feel an excitement, a tension in his youthful frame that filled him with anticipation. The pleasant warmth of the awakening day suffused the air and the boy and the old man, and then the johnboat broke the silence as they launched it, rippling the mirror of stout hardwoods as it made its way into the crystalline pool of water.

"Let's go," the boy's grandfather murmured. Jack followed the old man into the boat filled with rods and tackle and paddle and net and bucket and seat cushions and all the other gear that must accompany them on their journey. A kingfisher worked the bank, hopping from willow branch to muddy shore as the boy and the old man baited their lines.

Jack's was the first to go taut, the rod bending as the boy snapped to attention, remembering, "Let him take it, let him take it, don't horse him," the old man's teachings from the summers of years gone by, years before this spring and this day and the change that must surely come. Then the fish was in the net and the old man was whispering congratulations, and the boy's feeling of anticipation turned to an exhilaration that tingled in his arms and his legs.

"I got him! I got him! Isn't he a beauty, Grandpa? He's bigger than any I caught last year, isn't he?" the boy cried. And the old man said yes, he's a big one, and the smile made its way slowly from mouth to eyes, and the old man breathed a breath of life that the boy didn't notice. Holding the fish by its lip for Jack to study, the old man passed it to the boy, who took it gingerly as boys will hold the first fish of spring, and then dropped it into the bucket, the bass churning and splashing in its fear.

As the fish clamored to escape the bucket, Jack felt the fisherman's remorse creep into his belly. Embarrassed by it, the boy kept quiet, but the old man readily sensed the boy's dilemma and said, "Jack, he's the first of many for you and me today, so let's bait your line and see if you can out-fish your old Grandpa this morning." The boy turned his face from the bucket to his grandfather, and saw the smile and remembered the thrill of the fish as it struck the line, and the remorse was gone as quickly as it had come.

Circling the pond, the two patiently worked the bank while a lazy hawk floated overhead. The yearling bass gobbled the worms, and before midmorning the bucket was full. "Let's try those crickets in the middle, down deep," suggested the old man, "and see if the shellcracker are hungry." The boy had only heard of shellcracker, the large bream his mother loved to pan fry. Adding this fish to his list of conquests would top off the morning. The old man paddled the boat toward the center of the pond, and the fishermen changed their rigs to corks and bream hooks in anticipation of this final delight of the trip.

Suddenly the old man flinched, a constricting pain gripping his chest. He dropped his rod, and the boy looked back. The smile that so often covered the face he loved was gone, and in its place

was unmasked fear. In an instant the old man had fallen off the seat, tumbling onto the cooler the boy's mother had packed with drinks and sandwiches.

"Grandpa, what's wrong?" the boy cried.

The response came slow and wavering, "Help me, Jack."

A burst of panic overwhelmed the boy. His grandfather's voice sounded strange, like someone talking on the radio, disconnected from the time and space Jack occupied. The boy wanted to go to the old man, to pull him back to the seat, but his freckled legs were frozen. Jack tried to speak, but his words choked in his throat as they did when he dreamed of being kidnapped.

The old man's eyes rolled back. His mouth dropped open, the tongue extending while gurgling sounds issued from his throat. The boy reached for an arm that lay across the gunwale of the boat, heaving and pulling in a desperate attempt to right the old man, to return him to the place he had occupied only moments before, to a time that could be no more. The boy felt the tremors of the death-grip the old man suffered, and glanced quickly around him for something, for someone to tell this thing to stop, to drive these demons away, but there was nothing, no one. The old eyes glazed and fixed, and the tremors halted. The lifeless arm collapsed with a thud against the wall of the boat as the boy uttered a stark and terrible scream of sounds with no words, a scream of recognition of an end, and of a beginning.

The boy grabbed the paddle and jerked it through the water as he stood, the boat listing heavily to one side with the weight of the dead man. The boat semi-circled its way to the bank. Oblivious to the boy's shock, the hawk sailed above them and the kingfisher searched the shallow water. The sun was directly overhead now. The boat careened its way to a landing. His hands trembling, Jack crawled over the man and the gear to the front of the boat and jumped out, splashing into the water and onto the grassy bank. The old man lay peacefully in the johnboat, his eyes a pale and glassy blue, fixed on the green tops of the trees that leaned over them.

"Ah-h-h-h-h," the boy shrilled as he ran towards the cabin, through the scrub oak and wild azalea, clawing at whatever blocked his way,

hunched over and tight as a fist. He reached the cabin, once a sanctuary for his grandfather, and pulled, then pushed the knob on the front door, visualizing the telephone on the wall next to the refrigerator. Of course the door was locked. For a moment panic overtook the boy to the point of nausea, and he felt a wave of heat spread through him, his blood coursing through his young veins. Next to the front step sat a large stone, a decorative rock his mother had placed there years ago. He picked it up and heaved it through the top pane of glass in the window nearest the door. His trembling hands found the lock, and the window lifted with ease.

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