



The One That Got Away

*Sometimes when the water is quiet you can
almost hear the fish laughing at you.*

—Author Unknown

It was a windy morning. Not cold, just windy, and sunny. Rainy Lake rippled like a dark blue flag creating a perfect “walleye chop” as we prepped for our daylong fishing trip. It looked to be a spectacular day for fishing.

I plopped into the old, red metal motorboat along with my dad, my cousin Sam, and my brother Jake. We began the bumpy trip across the lake to our favourite fishing spot. I loved the brisk, clean smell of the open water. A couple of Canadian loons bobbed not far off the coast of our island—diving and playing as we passed. Recent laws preventing non-Canadians from owning property here meant that very few Americans owned a piece of this beautiful wilderness. But my grandparents had purchased our island many years earlier, so our family was allowed to keep it.

As we neared our destination the landscape began to change. The shallow, sloping shoreline turned to steep rocky cliffs, and the lake began narrowing into a point. We began moving against a current as we entered the mouth of Canoe River.

Rainy Lake is a large, inland lake that straddles the Canada—U.S. border between Ontario and Minnesota. The water level is controlled by a series of dams on the several rivers that feed the lake. We were heading toward the water below the Canoe River dam; the relatively

shallow water there creates a perfect spawning ground for many fish species, resulting in some of the best fishing anywhere. The only problem is that not many large fish actually live in the river—they’re back out in the lake. We’d always caught a lot of fish here, but they were always smaller.

My dad slowed the boat as we reached our fishing spot, then cut the engine. Silently we readied our poles and lines. I put on a golden spinner, and noticed my brother and my cousin doing the same. These spinners were perfect for luring shore fish like bass, perch, and the occasional northern pike. Deep-water fish, like walleyes and muskies, rarely ever decide to bite one of these shiny shallow-water skimmers.

I noticed my dad attaching a strange lure shaped like a frog to the end of his line. “Do you really think you’ll catch anything with that abomination?” I asked.

“It’s never caught me anything before,” he replied, “but you never know.”

I thought using that lure was a waste of time, but decided to say nothing. I figured if he wanted to waste his day pulling that thing through the water without a bite, he could go right ahead!

By now, the unrelenting wind had pushed our little boat into a small, sheltered bay. Without the wind, I could smell the “wormy” scent of nature, of decay and good soil. This would be a good bay to cast our lines into. There were sure to be some bass and northern pike hiding amongst the fallen logs and huge rocks protruding from the water.

I made my first cast into the shallow, murky water. Almost instantly a medium-sized bass hit my lure. It’s hard to describe the exciting, adrenaline rush of having a fish on the line. Reeling in a fish is an art. Keeping that fish on the line while pulling it toward you requires a lot of skill and finesse. Luckily I had learned from some pretty great teachers. I took a deep breath and began reeling in my line. The key to landing the fish is to keep the tip of your rod pointed up toward the sky, and to reel in the fish at a smooth, controlled rate. Eventually, I pulled the beautiful bass into the boat with the help of my dad, who handled the net. I removed the hook, then measured and weighed it. Then I put the slippery, flopping fish back in the water. Suddenly my

cousin Sam called out, "I got one!"

The next hour and a half went roughly the same. With someone catching a fish, calling it out, and then bringing it into the boat with the help of someone netting it. Soon we had caught a total of seventeen fish: six for me, five for my dad, three for Jake, and three for Sam. Although we'd caught a whole variety of species, no one had yet netted a walleye. This was disappointing, but not unexpected. All the fish we'd caught were either small or medium sized.

Suddenly Dad yelled, "Got one!" There was a flurry of movement as everyone tried to get their own lures into the boat so they could help net Dad's fish. I was ready first, so I was put in charge of the net. Stepping over open tackle boxes and coolers I made my way past Jake and Sam to the back where Dad was now standing at work, reeling in his fish. As I reached him, I realized the fish he was battling wasn't some little perch. His rod was bent almost completely in half, and his arms gleamed with sweat from the exertion of holding the pole steady.

As I readied the largest net I prepared myself for whatever was about to emerge from the icy water. I suspected it was a very large northern pike, because the fish had taken his hook near the surface, and the line wasn't showing the spastic movements of a struggling bass.

As Dad brought the fish in closer to the boat, in a quick flash of scales I could see it was longer than a bass, but without the sleek build of a northern pike. Suddenly the fish was right next to the boat, and I quickly plunged my net into the water. For one brief second it appeared I had succeeded in netting the fish. I felt a sudden weight as I attempted to heave the end of the net out of the water.

What happened next will be forever burned into my memory. I managed to successfully heft the net out of the water with the huge fish in it, but the net was still over the water. I realized then that the fish was not a northern pike, but instead the largest walleye I had ever seen. Its tail and head hung over each side of the three-foot diameter net. The incredibly muscular body suddenly stiffened, turning the fish into a rigid pole. Suddenly it was no longer lying in the net, but instead it was lying on top of the frame. Then, with what seemed like a knowing look in its old, wise eye, the monstrous walleye easily rolled

off the frame and slipped back into the icy waves. It spit out the hook a second later, and disappeared.

Silence swept over us like a wave over the rocks as each of us realized what had happened. We had just witnessed possibly the biggest walleye in the river, and we had no proof of it. Nobody spoke for the rest of the outing. We were all too busy thinking about the one that got away.

~Mitchell Kastanek
Amery, Wisconsin, USA