

## Angling

By Kristina Riggle

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Gladys glanced at her Timex in the yellow slanting light of the early morning. Billy was late, and she half wondered if he wouldn't show up at all. Maybe she'd get a message from him in a minute about having too much work. "I'm so busy," he would always say, in their infrequent, rusty phone calls since Fred's funeral. Once the fuss and bother of death started to taper off, so did their calls, and the topics they could discuss. Talk of insurance and wills and tombstones hardly made for thrilling conversation, but it filled the dead air on the phone.

Fred was the chatterbox in their marriage, everyone said so. This state of affairs was always perfectly simpatico to Gladys, while her husband was alive and kicking. She'd never thought ahead to wonder what would happen after he kicked it.

Fishing, though. Quiet would be perfect for fishing. So she'd sent Billy a message, and here she was, standing on the greying ancient dock at the family cabin, hoping her son wouldn't stand her up.

She checked her Timex again and was reaching for her years-old iPhone to check her texts with great reluctance, when her ears perked up at the sound of tires crunching on gravel; her boy made it after all.

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William gripped the side of the boat as his mother clomped her way in after him. Any knowledge he had of the physics of the situation—her 110 pounds, the broad steadiness of the fishing boat—evaporated as it rocked back and forth like one of those sickening carnival rides he always hated at the county fair.

His mother shot him a look from under the brim of her cap. “Billy, I know perfectly well how to get into a boat without tipping us into the drink.”

“I go by William now.”

“I named you Billy.”

“You named me William. You called me Billy.”

“Excuse me, Counselor.”

William didn’t correct her that he wasn’t a litigator, and no one called him Counselor any more than they called him Billy.

His mother busied herself in the front of the boat (bow or stern, he could never remember) and he relaxed a bit with her attention pulled away. It wasn’t until Pop died that William realized how much his dad carried all their conversations with his never-ending stream of jokes, anecdotes and reports about all the neighbors’ activities. “I’m so busy!” William had been reduced to blurring when his mother called, though he wasn’t, particularly. He’d feel like an actor who’d forgotten his lines in those moments, desperate for someone to steal the scene.

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Gladys was all too pleased to turn to the outboard motor and away from Billy—*William*—and glare at the machine. She was a little rusty starting it. Fred always had. She was perfectly capable

of course; she'd done it all the time with her brothers, before she even met Fred, back when his family first rented the neighboring cottage.

Gladys gave it a yank. It sputtered. Her neck prickled with the sensation of Billy's eyeballs burning a path right through the sticky morning air. If she didn't get this, they'd have to shift positions, scoot past, perhaps actually tip over...

She damn near fell off the seat with a full-body yank, but the motor growled to life. She sagged in relief, fully aware of how much her shoulder would hurt that night.

Worth it.

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William tensed his leg to stop the nervous knee-jiggle. He was a grown-up, after all. He wasn't about to be sent to his room or grounded from going to the movies.

He'd wanted to broach a sticky subject for some weeks now, but in the weighty silence of the pauses in their phone calls, his nerve would fail when he would hear the splashing of dishwater as she cleaned up dinner plates. Maybe she wouldn't even really be listening, as she scrubbed at a stubborn piece of casserole burned onto the Pyrex dish.

But then she'd invited him fishing, which felt like fate or something, since there would be nothing to do but sit in a boat and stare at the water.

"So. Mom."

"Mmmm."

Gladys had her eyes glued to the bobber. She danced it along the water, maybe trying to make the dying hunk of nightcrawler shimmy in the weedy green lake.

“So. Relationships. Hard, sometimes. Right?”

“If you say so.”

“I mean, nobody’s perfect.”

William noticed her head tilt minutely before she replied, “Surely not.”

“But we should also, I don’t know, enjoy ourselves, right?”

“I s’pose that’s so. If you’re not, you might as well watch TV alone and pick the damn channel yourself.”

William gripped his pole harder to contain his glee. He was getting somewhere! Max had thought he was insane to even try. *She’ll never listen to you. She’s Joan Crawford in overalls and a trucker hat.*

*Ornery* was the word people had used, when William was growing up. Gladys was famously ornery.

Maybe so. But she was, in fact, listening.

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Gladys reeled in her line and cast it again. Poor dead Fred had always thought she did this too much. But it was the best part of fishing—the wrist flick, the graceful arc of the line tracing through the air. Her new fellow, on the other hand? Carl couldn’t care less how she fished, if she did, when she did. He might not even have noticed she left the house that morning.

Unlike Billy’s husband (five years and her brain still tripped over that, her son’s *husband*) who always had something to say about every damn thing. Her Billy couldn’t pour a glass of wine without a *remark* of some kind of from Max. He’d smirk when he did it with his stupid movie star face. *All in good fun!*

“Well,” Gladys said, and cleared her throat. “Folks should feel good about who they’re with. Your dad—he had his shit—but he always seemed to like having me around.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Billy, cranking partway around and the boat swayed with the movement. He waited for it to settle before going on. “Everyone should want that.”

Gladys nodded, looking at her bobber, thinking of the first Thanksgiving when that Max person charmed the entire room of cousins, aunts, uncles and hangers-on, while barely even looking at her boy.

Wasn’t fair to compare him to Lisa, probably, considering Billy and Lisa were apparently always friends and nothing more, not “an item” as Gladys always hoped. But Lisa gazed at Billy like he hung the moon.

Max she just didn’t *get*. Not because they were both boys, she’d gotten over that part eventually. It’s just that Max was such an unbearable show-off. He was tap dancing for attention every moment. It was unseemly. Tacky, her mother would have said.

Gladys felt a tiny tug and yanked the hook, reeling in against the pressure.

“Folks shouldn’t grab for just any person that comes along,” she said, hoping that came out casual and not dictatorial. In a flailing, unfocused adolescent fight, Billy had once called her a dictator. She’d never gotten over it.

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“No, they shouldn’t,” William replied, biting his lip to not sound so eager. “Eager beaver” his mom always called him, and he wasn’t sure that was a compliment. Her new... What, boyfriend? Lover? Ew, no... Whatever she called him, Carl was an inert lump of protoplasm who seemed to

barely know Gladys existed. Being a new widow would be lonely, sure, but that guy? That squishy old fart, after his dynamic, wiry, piss-and-vinegar Pop? It reeked of desperation, maybe boredom.

Carl did in fact give his mother something to do. She was always running him to some errand or visiting his numerous children. William couldn't remember their names. Just this past Christmas, his mother had signed the card with her name, Carl's, and "the children" without enumerating them.

William reeled in his dead, flaccid worm, shunned by all the fish, which were darting unseen through the weeds that brushed the boat. He turned his face away from Gladys so she wouldn't see the grimace as he removed the dead worm, flung it over the side, and replaced it with a more lively specimen. Gladys never got after him on a tedious, retrograde toxic masculinity basis. He felt quite sure she'd have scorned anyone of any gender who acted prissy over bait.

William cast his line again, glancing behind him to make sure he wouldn't accidentally hook his mother. There was a famous family story of his Pop hooking his brother in the mouth once with a careless cast. The visual of this moment had haunted William ever since. They'd had to snip the barb off the hook before pushing it out through his lip. The whole thing nearly put him off fishing entirely, and it had happened before he was born.

William pondered how to follow up her tantalizing mention of "just any person that comes along," clearly an opening regarding her attachment to Carl, the first man she'd dated since Pop's heart attack took him out while he mowed the lawn, long after he should have hired out that chore.

"I mean," William began, "it's just been on my mind, you know? About love and what it means." Aware he was sounding like a Hallmark Christmas movie, he rushed to add, "For grown-ups, that is. In real life."

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Gladys grunted her approval. Grown-ups, indeed. Billy seemed on the verge of something she recognized long ago, that his and Max's relationship was based on swoony, frothy, airy stuff like flowers and serenades. Literally. Max had once gotten someone to film him serenading Billy from the street up to their city apartment balcony, and then they'd posted it giddily on Instagram, which Gladys only saw because they connected Instagram to Facebook, which Gladys only checked because she was confirming the hours of the farm market. She had to admit Max had a fair voice, but it was all so gaudy and obnoxious.

That wasn't for love for grown-ups. That was puppy love, for swoony teenagers drawing hearts and initials on their Keds with Bic pens. She always hated those kids. She herself preferred to sneak cigarettes under the willow tree with Fred and defeat her brothers in arm wrestling.

These days, when she got home from fishing, Carl would take her hand as they sat side by side on the couch. He'd ask, "Catch anything?" and she'd answer, and she'd lean her head down on his soft expansive shoulder, then get up and go do something else.

She found herself smiling. "It's something you can always count on, I figure, if it's real, anyhow. You don't have to wonder about it. Solid. Like—"

Gladys interrupted herself. She had something on the line, something that was heavier, feistier, than seemed reasonable for this little inland lake. She rassed it around, bracing her foot against the side of the boat, rocking it a bit. A quick motion out of the corner of her eye was Billy, grabbing the side of the boat with his free hand. He always was easily startled.

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He watched his mother wrestle with the fish or clump of seaweed or trash or whatever it was on her line, as her statement about *solid* pinged around in his brain like a pinball. She didn't seem to have to worry about Carl, it was true. He seemed content to always be there on the couch, much like Pop was always there, too, but zipping around in motion, running his mouth, a reliably noisy presence.

Max was his own powerful presence, shining his light in any room, shining for William. They'd get back home and Max focused that radiance like a spotlight, right on him, bathing them both in its warmth. It was warm and bright and joyful and he never got enough of it. Max never turned his light off. William was always afraid of the dark, anyway, so this suited him just fine.

The surface of the water burst apart with a noisy splash, and a silvery flapping wet beast exploded out of the lake on the end of his mom's line. She lunged toward it with her free hand, but in one mighty contorted twist, the fish wrenched itself loose and soared with an improbable arc backward into the green murk.

"Dammit," Gladys said through a sigh. "So close."

"Yeah, wow," William answered. "Almost had it there."

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A further fruitless hour passed, and nothing else even nibbled her line. Gladys wordlessly began packing up, and Billy followed. He had barely seemed to try to catch anything, several times while his bobber jiggled in the water, his gaze was up in the treeline, or staring at a distant heron near shore, picking its way through the cattails.

As Gladys motored them toward the dock, his phone came to life and pinged. He leapt upon it, and beamed at whatever was there. Max, no doubt. Some mushy, show-offy declaration.

But his face glowed, she had to admit. Whatever doubts he might secretly be harboring, his face still reflected a kind of giddy joy that she'd never seen in him, back in his years of awkwardly trying to date nice Christian girls, or with his sweet friend Lisa.

Gladys raised her voice over the engine. "Glad we had this talk."

Billy smiled at her, that boyish, shy grin he always had, higher on one side than the other. Just like Fred. "Yeah. Me too."

She killed the motor to let the boat glide up to the dock, at just the right moment for it to effortlessly stop in the perfect place.

"Too bad we didn't catch anything," she said, steadying the boat and gesturing for William to get out first.

He bounced up gracefully onto the weathered boards with the confidence of a young person who still had both his original knees and all his cartilage. He reached down a hand to help her step up, a gesture she didn't need, but nonetheless accepted.

As she made it to the dock and drew up to her full height, he said, "Well, no day on the water is wasted, right?"

Fred's famous saying. Those two had almost nothing in common. But in certain lights, on certain days, it was unquestionable. Fred was still there, in a way, right in front of her, and God willing, would be for the rest of her life.

"Not wasted at all."

He shouldered their fishing poles, but hesitated before heading up the dock and back to shore. “As long as you’re happy,” he said, then chewed his bottom lip in a habit dating back to kindergarten.

“Happy as a person needs to be.” The rising sun just then burst through a gap in the trees on its way toward the midday sky, causing them both to flinch away from its sudden white glare.

He shifted position, putting himself with his back to the sun, so she was standing in his long shadow. “Should we do this again? Maybe we’ll have better luck next time.”

Gladys grinned up at her son, and the faint tracings of crow’s feet crinkling the skin by his eyes, no longer the baby-faced young man in a cap and gown framed on her mantelpiece at home.

“Sure thing, William,” she answered. “I’ll call you.”

THE END