

## TIM HERNLY

### *Lee Catches a Fish*

My buddy Bob Lee's got this quiet mean streak, on account of his ma's a hopeless drunk and his pa dumped him when he was a little kid to start a new family. Lee's pa was born in Korea, but he looks and talks American. I mean, yeah, he's got them squinty eyes, for sure, but he's also got this movie-star look, like Charles Bronson, so maybe people think he's just wise. He's the head swim coach at Barracuda, which always makes me laugh to think about, 'cause everybody knows it's a strictly whites-only club. If you come from Korea and want to pass for white, which is probably not a bad idea living in Nashville, I guess you marry a white lady and name your kid Robert E. Lee.

Lee and me started school together in Mrs. Keller's class, in first grade. Now we're about to finish up our sophomore year at Cumberland High. Hard to believe we were ever first-graders. We liked the same girl back then, Sarah Larson, but the next year she got sent away to the school for the smart kids and we never saw her again. I guess I liked her 'cause she was cute, in a bashful way, with her blonde braids and soft, little-girl face. I mean, I don't know any other reason for liking her; I never heard her say one single word. I guess it's OK they took her away to the smart school. Maybe they taught her how to talk.

You know how little kids can get mixed up writing their letters, like they'll make their E's or their R's backwards? Well, that's Lee, even today. Don't get me wrong, he's not dumb. I mean he can *play* dumb when he's got a mind to, but if you want a tough game of chess or you like to talk about real shit, like how stuff works, Lee's a damn good friend. But you won't catch him writing stuff down. Lee keeps a lot of secrets. I know some of them.

I told you how Lee's part Oriental and all, but he's really more redneck than anything. He's not a hillbilly redneck or a farmer redneck; it's more like he's a badass redneck. He chain-smokes Marlboro Reds, and smokes 'em in a decisive way. Jaw set forward a bit, mouth open half an inch, locked in position, and the smoke comes out in perfect rings or sheets or curly-cues – whatever Lee decides. I'd have to say it's pretty impressive for being sixteen, but it's also kind of a sick talent.

He wears this big green Army surplus jacket with pockets you could put city phone books in, and big storm-trooper boots. He's a stout six-foot tall, and when he walks, he stares straight ahead and takes a big stride, so people have to jump out of his way. He likes to intimidate people. Like he gets off from other people's fear. Some people say Lee likes to fight, but that's not really how it is. He gets this thing where he *needs* to fight to clear up his head. Something will happen that freezes

him up and the only way out for him is to fight. Being his friend means you got to fight him once in a while.

Lee says, for years now, his pa acts like Lee and his ma don't exist. The whole thing's pretty fucked up. You're a big-time swim coach, training a bunch of snotty rich kids to win gold medals, but you can't take the time to teach your *own boy* to swim? That's a real sore point with Lee. I guess maybe I'd be pissed off at everybody too.

I was over at Lee's once when his ma was cussing him out for fighting at school, and she says he's turning out just like his pa, using his fists 'cause he can't work things out with his words. I can see how it was when he was little: His ma getting drunk and sassy, cussing up a storm, and his pa losing his temper and beating on her till she shuts up. All I can say is, I wouldn't have wanted to live in *that* house growing up.

A couple weeks ago, on a Saturday afternoon, Lee and me went to play chess downtown, at Centennial Park. They got all these chess tables set in cement there, to where you can't move 'em. There's all kinds that go down there to play speed chess for money, kibitz or just hang out – kids, old men, bums, druggies. So me and Lee are playing a game and, at the next table, maybe six, eight feet away, this crazy guy, Tony C, is playing somebody we don't know. Tony C came from New York to go to college in Nashville a long time ago. He got messed up on drugs and dropped out, and now it's like he lives at Centennial. He's a pretty good chess player, but he's a loud-ass New Yorker – always trash-talking, picking at some old scab, trying to psych out the other guy.

So Tony C's needling this guy, "You're basically saying you don't want me coming over to your place anymore, is that it? You're too *good* for me – huh? Do I embarrass you?"

And the other guy says, "I'm saying, Tony, if you're coming over to my place, you got to *clean up* first, that's all. No offense, man, but... *Listen*, since you want to get in my face about it, I'll tell you the fucking *truth*. Patty says you always stink the place up."

And Tony C yells, "Fuck you!" and shoves all the pieces off the board at the other guy and marches off.

I glance across the board at Lee. His eyes are still pointed down at the board, but I can see he's doing this wheezy snicker – "heh-heh-heh-heh" – under his breath. That means somebody got hurt or embarrassed or something, and Lee's getting off on it. But that started something else spinning in Lee's head, and I don't see it till a few hours later.

It's almost dark and we're walking across the park to the drugstore to get something to drink and maybe steal some gum. I see he's got this determined look



in his eyes, and in his stride too. Something's bugging him. Then I hear him say, "...kill you... bitch!" in a deep, weird voice. It's like the voice isn't Lee's, exactly, but I know it came from him, from down in his gut.

It kind of spooks me. I look over at him and say, "What the fuck did you just say, man?"

Lee just says, "Nothing" and keeps walking straight ahead.

I can tell he didn't mean to blurt out what was troubling his mind, but he did, and it's too good to pass up. You can't let a guy say something fucked up like that and then pretend it didn't happen. That would be totally pussy, not to call him out. "You just grunted, 'I'm gonna kill you, bitch,' or something like that. You talking to me, or what? There's nobody else around..."

"I said I didn't say nothing, dickwad. Let it go."

"Whatever, man. You're seriously fucked up in the head, you know that?"

Lee stops walking and flicks his cigarette to the other side, into the grass. And I stop and turn half-way toward him, like I'm still waiting for him to explain. He lunges at me with both hands, pushing me backward onto the grass – a sucker-punch move. Before I can get up, he grabs my jacket at the neck with his left hand, punching at my head with his right fist, over and over, about five times. Only one punch lands, but it's enough to give me a bloody nose.

"You push it too far," said Lee. "I said I didn't say nothing, but you can't let it go. You always push it too far."

"What the fuck, man? You mumble some crazy shit and blame it on *me*?"

Lee tried to give me a hand to get up but I slapped it away. I got back to my feet and said, "You're seriously fucked up, asshole. You'd better stay the fuck away from me." And I veer off toward the stand where I'd locked up my bike, holding my thumb against my nose.

The next Monday morning we're waiting for our ride to pick us up for school, and Lee says, "Hey, man, that whole thing was fucked up... Tony C blowing up and throwing shit everywhere... Centennial's always a damn freak show." And just like that, we're friends again. Of course, Lee's full of shit for blaming Tony C for the fact his fist gave his friend a bloody nose, but he's too good a friend to stay pissed off at for long, and, after all, he did apologize.

When it's decent weather out, we go night fishing at this clearing in the woods on the riverbank. We call it the Living Room. That's our code. What we go for most is the carp, then and the big river cats. I almost hate to say that, 'cause some people like to get all snotty when you talk about carp fishing, like "I only fish for largemouth," or "I like to shoot flying fish from a helicopter with a crossbow." They're basically trying real hard to say they're too high-class for carp fishing, but what they're really saying is they're ignorant and full of shit. There's nothing you

can fish from a riverbank that will fight you like a carp, that much I guarantee. You hook into a twenty-pound river carp, it's like getting strapped to a wild horse.

But here's the thing – it's a sucker fish, eats all the crap off the riverbed. So you can't eat a carp. You catch 'em for sport, and throw 'em back. There's this old colored fisherman down by the trestle bridge that smokes 'em and eats 'em, but I've never tasted carp and never want to. Even if you wanted to eat one, you can't clean it, on account of the scales. It'd be like trying to skin a coconut. So, carp's got a bad reputation. So what? They're fun as hell to catch.

Last time we were at the Living Room, about a week ago, Lee caught a nice one. Should have been a good night. Would have been, but Lee's in one of his asshole redneck moods. I'll tell you about it.

By the time we finally got all our gear together, it was getting dark. To get to the Living Room, you go down to the woods behind this old church by Lee's house. The woods are so thick with sticker bushes and vines, the only way in is through the willow tree. You can't see what's on the other side of the tree, you just have to trust. You put your hands together in front of you and dive through the willow. It can be all sunshiny out, but in the woods, it's a different world. It's always cool and dark and smells damp. It's like walking face-first into a waterfall and coming out the other side, into a secret cave.

As you pass through, the willow fingers kind of sweep through your hair and collapse all around you. Going through the willows at nighttime can be spooky. A long willow finger might reach down and lick the back of your neck in the dark. You can't see what's falling on you, and you might, just for a second, think it's a snake or something. It's not going to make you scream or nothing, unless you're a pussy, but it'll definitely give you a cold shiver.

We're lugging two backpacks, everything you need for fishing: Poles, tackle box, some Wheatie-balls for bait, about half a case of cold Little Kings, can of lighter fluid, box of strike-anywheres, Lee's crappy transistor radio, and a big bag of sliders and onion rings from Krystal's. It's a good hike, but we know the trail cold.

When you get to the clearing, it's all laid out like a big living room with a dirt floor. That's how it got its name. There's a couple downed cottonwood trees that make good chairs, and in the middle there's a circle of rocks where you build a fire. You cut a little tree branch into a Y-shape and shove it down into the mud, to prop your fishing pole up on, diagonal. At night, you might get a little moonlight reflecting off the water, or the moon might make the whole Living Room glow, depending. All you need is enough light so you can see your line at the end of your pole. That's where you keep your eyes, like a hawk, waiting for a hit.

It's about one in the morning, we're a little buzzed, got our lines in the water, and Lee gets a big strike. He grabs his pole, sets the hook, and right away you



know it's a big carp, 'cause the line's jerking from side to side like crazy. Some fish, when they get hooked, like a big river cat, will pull straight out from shore, make a break for the rapids, but a carp will pull out and zigzag all at once, hoping to cut your line on a rock or get you caught up in the weeds.

Lee and this carp are matching wits (and I'd say they're a pretty good match). You can hear the reel squealing, letting out line, and you can see Lee's pole practically doubled over from the strain, but he's still got the stub of a cigarette between his lips, and he looks to be in charge. He finally does land the fish after ten or fifteen minutes of wrangling.

Lee holds the fish up for inspection. It's definitely a good-size carp, every bit of twelve pounds, we judged (which means about nine or ten, actual). Not a giant, but probably in the top ten we ever caught at the Living Room. Then, instead of throwing the fish back in, he grabs a stringer from the tackle box and strings him up through the mouth and gill, like he's going to take him home. Then he drops the fish back in the water. The fish just sits there, wagging his tail back and forth, real slow, swimming in place, just catching his breath. Probably feels like he just ran a marathon. Lee's standing on a big rock by shore, holding onto the stringer like he's walking a dog.

In a couple minutes, the fish starts moving forward a bit, toward deeper water. The fish swims out, maybe five, six feet, then Lee yanks him back in. He's hoping to feel the fish struggle, cat-and-mouse style. But it's stupid, 'cause the carp's totally wore out. He's got no fight left in him. Lee's acting like when you take a little kid fishing. They have to always be playing with the fish you already caught, or the minnows or the worms, or something. They're far more interested in that stuff than catching a fish.

Lee hauls the fish up out of the water again, watching its mouth open and close, open and close, like it's gasping for air, and he blows smoke in its face. That's the kind of asshole redneck thing I can't stand. It's like he's saying, "Yeah, boy, I beat your ass, didn't I?" Lee thinks it's funny, but he doesn't see what he's doing. I mean, it's real sad, 'cause you got to believe you're a real *nobody* to trash-talk a *fish*. And I think to myself, when did Lee decide he was a nobody? When did that happen? It must have been sometime between first grade and now, but when?

Then he takes the fish over by the fire pit and ties the stringer around a tree branch, so the fish is hanging there, twirling around, a few feet over the hot coals. Then Lee starts gathering up some little twigs and puts them in the fish's mouth and gills, like he's decorating a little Christmas tree. Then Lee picks up some cigarette butts from the fire pit, and when the fish opens his mouth he shoves one in, and then another. I've had enough.

"Jesus Christ, Lee, you're acting like a fucking two-year-old, playing with

that damn fish. Would you fucking grow up? Throw it back in or kill it – one of the two."

"Mind your own business, fuckwad," says Lee. "It's *my* fish."

"Yeah, first you torment this fish to get your rocks off, like some sicko. Next thing it's gonna be you're fucking with some little kid, you sick fuck."

"Are you deaf, asshole? This is my fish, so I'll decide if I'm gonna teach the fucking fish to swim, or kill it, or whatever I want, so stay the fuck out of it."

I'm just standing there, slack-jaw, thinking about what I just heard him say. "What the fuck, Lee? That makes no sense at all. You're *gonna teach the fish to swim*? Are you drunk?"

"That's not what I said, dumbass. Open your ears. I said I'll decide if I'm gonna let it swim away, 'cause it's my goddamn fish."

"Well, I heard what you said, clear as a bell. You said you'll decide if you're gonna teach the fish to swim. Oh, that's good. That's real good, Lee. You do that. You decide if you're gonna teach the fish or just fucking molest it. Let me know what you decide, will you?"