Fishing . . . So it Goes

by Jason Love

Fishing My dad came down the mountain for a visit. He was carrying only one commandment: Thou shalt honor thy father. We decided to fish because my dad is a longtime fisherman and I ... well, I shalt honor my father.

I've never understood the attraction of fishing, trying for hours to catch something that costs a dollar at McDonald's. It's not like we would eat our catches anyway. My wife, having zero stink tolerance, told me to choose my fishing clothes carefully because when I got home she would burn them.

But men need to hunt and fish and exhibit their kills by the fireplace. I myself keep one such trophy, a catfish that, when you touch it, wriggles around and sings "Take Me to the River."

At least we didn't charter a boat. Have you seen these things? They've got radar, sonar, migration charts ... the poor fish don't stand a chance. Some fish lose their nerve and jump right up on deck as you pass.

Fish aren't the brightest of creatures to begin with. My dad told me about the jacksmelt, a fish so dumb that you catch them without even baiting the hook. They just like to swallow sharp, shiny objects much like the American voter.

My dad brought a bucket of live, sentient anchovies, and I realized, watching them swim their last swims, that you don't stand much chance of being a fisherman when you feel sorry for the bait. So it goes.

(For the record, anchovies smell like gutter slime and whoever thought to put them on pizza is a terrible, terrible person.)

My dad blinded an anchovy with his hook as he described the summers he spent fishing as a boy. He finished his line and started on my own without ever glancing at his fingers. By all accounts, he was a master baiter.

My dad let me cast my own line, which I did without spilling blood (my wife bet that I would come home with a hook in my own mouth). And with that I watched for nibbles, those things that happen when your pole bobs up and down exactly the way it does every time the water moves. In the first hour, I reported 362 nibbles.

Before long I realized that fishing isn't so much about catching fish as it is about drinking beer and talking. My dad and I addressed all sorts of things that never come up when you're watching TV. He recalled, for instance, the time I poured Ex-Lax in the salad dressing and how he considered, for a moment, releasing me back to the wild.

We also had a contest writing fish jokes:

"When you weigh a fish, do you include the scales?"

"How long do fish wait to swim after eating?"

"Why do we go fishing but never chase down chickens or track cattle?"

And right when we forgot about nibbles, the pole doubled over and my dad woke up like fireman to siren. With an almighty heave, he planted the hook and reeled in his prey. The fish, not knowing our intentions, struggled like a madman but soon surfaced to behold his captors.

My dad netted the white trout and dumped him in the bucket with the anchovies. We admired the catch in silence and then, without shaking hands or taking a picture, released him back to the wild. Even now, that fish is cringing in the coral telling stories of his abduction.

Before you knew it, my dad had recast his line and was looking for nibbles, now with a charge in his eyes. He was The Old Man by the Sea, at peace with Neptune's grab bag, happy to be fishing at all.

I myself didn't actually, officially catch any fish, but I did avoid falling into the ocean, which cost my wife another sizable wager.