

For the Records

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I got a letter from Uncle Pete the other day, crammed into an envelope with a couple dozen pictures of Hurricane Ike's damage to "The Camp" on Galveston Bay. He wrote: "It's beat up all right, but still standing—it's the only one on the slip still standing." I could hear his voice behind the words—loud, deep, and proud. "But," he wrote, "I don't guess we'll be doing any fishing this summer." Uncle Pete was trying to be cheerful, but I knew The Camp's future was bleak. He said repairs would cost \$20,000 that nobody in our family had.

I slid the letter to the back of the stack of pictures. The first was taken from the road facing the slip with the Intercoastal Canal beyond because the neighboring beach houses no longer blocked the view. They were only shallow mounds of splintered wood and twisted metal at the bottom of the pilings that the houses used to be raised on. Ours was still standing, although the stairs were gone, as was the wall on that side and the balcony. The other walls were still there, though stripped of their siding, but the roof was in places peeled back like the lid of a can. Whenever I first stepped out of the car upon arriving there at the start of vacation, I used to just stand for a moment breathing in the tangy sea air and glorying in the sight of the white and royal blue paint, and the American flag flying from the balcony and the lifesavers with the family name hanging beneath.

The next picture was of the open area under the house—my favorite place, because that's where the hammocks were slung. We always had three big hammocks between the pilings, and I spent most of my time in one or another of them, reading, napping, or just swinging to the sound of the water lapping against the slip. This was where all the fishing paraphernalia was kept: the tackle boxes, the shrimp tank, and the racks of poles and landing nets. Also here was the water cooler where my sister Mary and cousin Ellen would imprison the crabs they caught for inspection before dumping them back in the Gulf. Aunt Janet always kept the freezer stocked with raw chicken necks for them, and they'd tie

a piece to their line, lower it into the water and check it every ten minutes. Whenever they caught a crab, they'd name it Fosco, Sebastian, or Pagoo, and describe its distinguishing speckles and shell chips in a log they kept, so they'd know if they ever caught it again—the girls were horrified the day they discovered that the Crawfords next door actually boiled and ate the crabs they caught. All that was under the house now was a tangle of dangling pipes and wires, and a pile of palm branches, a dented pot, a shredded floatie, and bits of fishing poles, shingles and siding. Soggy pages from the crab log were mixed in—the girls had kept it in the garage which wasn't there anymore. A pair of sneakers was hanging by its laces from the rafters. The shelf where we kept the boom box and all the fishing supplies was swept away by the storm surge. The cement floor where we used to race hermit crabs was covered by two inches of mud.

Moving on, I found a few pictures of the interior, which Uncle Pete had reached with a ladder. Most of the inside was visible since the kitchen, living room, and dining area were all part of the same open space. Dirt covered the surface of the bar, the ceiling was a sickly yellow, and the white paneled walls were curled like wet paper. The couch, chairs, and dining table were pushed together or overturned, with seashells we had collected throughout the years strewn between. I saw Michelle's watercolor of the Port Bolivar lighthouse lying against the wall opposite the one it had used to hang on, the wooden frame swollen and cracked and the glass shattered, the painting itself discolored and the colors washed out. The folding table on which there was always a puzzle in progress was still in its corner, but there was no puzzle—the discolored pieces were scattered inside the house and outside. In a heap under the table were the pieces of the seashell lamp, a misshapen throw pillow from the bedroom, and the obnoxious clock whose ticking always kept Uncle David awake at night. The leather ottoman was impaled by part of the window frame. I thought about the summer when all the movie stars wore their hair in tiny braids, and all the nights I had sat on that ottoman, braiding Michelle's hair

as she braided Mary's hair as *she* braided Ellen's. The antique fishing net that hung above the bar was torn and mangled about the legs of the overturned dining table.

The kitchen cabinets sagged like their bottoms were made of wet cardboard, but the lighthouse dishes were still neatly stacked and organized by color the way Aunt Janet liked them. She lived in that kitchen during vacation—constantly stocking the fridge and counters with cinnamon rolls, chicken salad sandwiches, sweet tea, and Flounder fillets. Even so, there were never any leftovers when vacation had passed. Uncle Pete called it the “Fat Farm.” On the buckled floor was the blue bench that used to sit on the missing balcony. It was the drying bench, where we used to spread our wet swim suits and towels in the sun. Uncle Pete would sit on that bench to watch the rain, while my cousin Ellen and I played Gin Rummy and Speed. Our dads and brothers would be absorbed in a game of Risk, shouting and banging the table for world domination. Michelle would play old show tunes on her guitar and sing. I loved rainy days at “The Camp” as much as the sunny times on the beach.

A picture inside the bedroom showed where the missing wall had been. The beds and nightstands were flung against the opposite wall, and slivers of wood driven by the wind stuck out of pillows and mattresses. Looking at the sodden blankets, I thought of the summer we had come down after Dad's surgery for Crone's Disease. Uncle Pete had angioplasty that same summer, and the two spent a lot of time in bed; they referred to the room as the “infirmery.” Sticking out from under a nightstand was Pudge, my old stuffed bear. Only his head was visible, but I could tell he had a rip somewhere because white cotton stuffing was pinned under one of the table legs. He seemed the greatest casualty so far. Grandpa Hall gave me that bear, and it was all I had to remember him. When I was four, just after his death, my mom told me that Pudge was magic, and that whenever I was sad, if I just squeezed him hard enough, he'd make the sad go away. For a long time I believed her.

The last few photos in the stack were of the outside again, along the slip. A boat was wedged upside down between two palms on the other side of the water. But it wasn't Uncle Pete's boat—he loved his boat like his life, and hauled it behind his truck when he evacuated to Houston before the storm. I thought about all the fishing trips when he took my brother and sisters and me on, and the all the “big fish” stories we'd swap over dinner with our parents and cousins:

“MICH-ELLE! What're you doin' out here?” Uncle Pete drawled in his booming voice as he creaked down the stairs from the house. “Your Dad's callin' for you to come get packed.” His wispy hair was exactly the color of his white t-shirt. The white stood out sharply against his khaki shorts and his skin which was so tan I always thought of it as orange.

Michelle just wrinkled her nose and poked her hook neatly through the shrimp's brains.

“Told you,” I said.

She'd been fishing all morning because we were leaving for home that afternoon, and I had caught 22 fish that week to her 21. It ruffled her because she worked hard at it, and I didn't. A dedicated fisherwoman, she'd get up before dawn to go out on the bay with Uncle Pete, and would have her line in the water outside the house in the evening when the barges cut through the water like alligators, driving schools of fish out of the canal and into the slip. Michelle made Uncle Pete teach her how to hook the shrimp we got from the wrinkled old bait lady at the shop down the road, and also the minnows we caught with a trap and strips of raw bacon in the shallows at the end of the slip. She could get the fish off her line by herself, too. Her casting was far from masterful—she made a bird's nest on every pole she touched—but if time and effort could do anything to improve it, she was on her way to perfection.

I only fished to be with the rest of the family. Uncle Pete, my dad, or my brother had to bait my hook and I never knew what kind of fish it was I'd caught, but I could cast for myself and never made a mess of my line, so nobody minded helping me. That week, my pole must have been charmed; I was reeling in catfish and flounder as fast as I could get a line out.

"I'm not leaving until I get one more," Michelle muttered. She stepped back and then swung all her weight forward, launching the shrimp to the other side of the slip, just in front of a docked boat. "This time for sure."

"You're still lettin' go early and jerkin' back late," Uncle Pete commented, joining us on the water's edge. He always spoke too loudly because he was almost deaf.

"But I didn't get a bird's nest."

"Huh?"

"I DIDN'T GET A BIRD'S NEST!" she repeated.

"Oh. Yeah, but look at your reel—see that loop there? That's bad."

Michelle frowned and pulled out some slack to fix the menacing loop.

Just then her orange bobber went under.

"Michelle!" I shouted pointing at the spot.

The line was flying off her reel in a humming blur, and in a panic she put her thumb on the reel to stop it; this didn't work, and she burned her thumb bloody. "OUCH OUCH OUCH!" she squealed.

“Now don’t break the line—give him some slack! You’ve hooked ‘im all right,” Uncle Pete shouted while his hands hovered around Michelle’s rod, itching to grab it and bring the fish in himself. “Just let ‘im wear himself out.”

“I know! I’ve got him—holy cow, he’s gotta be HUGE! Oh my thumb—”

“Keep your tip up now!”

“I know,” Michelle grunted. She planted her feet and bent backward, fighting to hold on to the pole with both hands without her burned thumb which stuck out above the handle.

“Maybe it’s an eel?” I suggested. That was the hardest thing I’d ever brought in. Eels wriggled and jerked and put up a fight even after you’d got them to the surface.

“Hah! An eel! Honestly, Kaylee— an eel is like—nothing—compared to this thing— whatever it is,” she huffed, still struggling to hold on to her pole. “Uncle Pete— could you maybe take it— for a minute?”

“Sure thing, Hon!” he boomed, only too eager. In another minute, he would’ve snatched it from her anyway.

My sister dropped onto the grass, sucking and blowing on her thumb, intently watching the spot where her taught line disappeared into the water. “It’s still MY fish,” she told me.

“Yeah it is,” I agreed, also watching the line. “And it prolly counts for two.” I wasn’t competitive when it came to fishing.

She smiled around her thumb.

“Well he is a big ‘un! Never thought you could catch somethin’ like this in the slip,” Uncle Pete shouted. “What the hell were you fishing with?”

“Shrimp.”

He just shook his head and eased the rod tip up a bit more as the monstrosity on the hook stopped zigzagging and pulled back steadily in one direction.

“What do you think it is, Uncle Pete?” I asked.

“Could be a ray. Or a real big redfish. Might even be a mouse shark.”

Michelle’s eyes glittered and she forgot her thumb for a moment. “Uncle Pete, can we take a picture of me and whatever-it-is when we get it up? You know, for the records?” The “records” were a series of framed pictures that hung on the wall outside the bathroom: Uncle David and a redfish almost as long as his arm, taken before I was born; Aunt Janet with a string of a dozen fat trout, all caught in the same trip; my Dad, years ago, with poofy hair and an enormous flounder; and a bunch of photos of Uncle Pete with colorful fish I couldn’t identify, all bigger than anything I had ever seen.

“Well of course we’ll get a picture! It’s gotta be the biggest fish ever heard of in this slip,” he answered, flashing his crinkly smile at her.

We were quiet for a moment, awed by the occasion. Then there was a splash.

“Didya see that?” Uncle Pete exclaimed.

“I couldn’t tell what—” Michelle gasped.

“He’s gettin’ tired. I saw his tail, so he’s not a ray. And there wasn’t a spot, so he’s not a redfish either.”

"Then what is it?"

"We'll see in a minute. He's about done," Uncle Pete slowly reeled the line in.

Michelle ran to fetch the landing net and her digital camera.

Then the line caught again, halfway across the slip.

"What the—" Uncle Pete frowned. "I guess the bugger's got some fight left after all." But when he eased off the pole, the line didn't pull back. He tried again. "I think it's stuck, or somthin'."

Michelle and I leaned over the edge, straining to see what would come up. The first thing we saw almost made Michelle drop the net into the water. It was a tree—or part of a tree, at least. Branches, still leafy, rose out of the surface as Uncle Pete pulled the line in.

"It's a bush?" I wondered.

"No. Just a branch from Dick and Judy's tree-trimmin' yesterday," Uncle Pete answered. "But there's gotta be a fish on here somewhere."

The sight of what looked like the top of a tree swimming across the slip toward us made me laugh, but Michelle still searched the water for her catch.

"Ha!" Uncle Pete's shout made us both jump back. "There he is! Haha! It's a drum!"

A grey skinned fish, a whopping two and a half feet long, rolled over in the branches that were just under us then. Uncle Pete traded Michelle the rod for the net, and a minute later fish, line, and tree branch were lying together in a jumble on the grass.

"So, can you eat a drum?" Michelle asked, in awe of the thing's sheer size and weight.

"Nope. Drum are the ocean's garbage disposals," Uncle Pete explained as he plucked out the hook. "We'll snap a quick picture, but we're gonna have to throw it back."

"Oh." Michelle's face fell, but she perked up again when I told her to pose for the records.

"His name is Goliath," she informed Uncle Pete as he rolled the fish back into the slip.