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## Walk on Water

The boy and the man—the boy's step-father—came every year when the ice was thick enough to hold them. "Let's walk on water," the man would say. And he'd grin at his own joke and reach out and give the boy's hair a tousle. And the boy would roll his eyes and resist, but he would smile, too. It was usually January.

The owner of the fish house rental knew them. He was a barrel of a man with chapped cheeks and a purple, cratered nose carved from the wine-soaked end of a cork. A white mesh cap with a yellow band of sweat squeezed his head. Red letters screamed BIG MIKE'S FISHIN' SERVICE, LAKE MILLE LACS, MN across the front.

"Got you a twelve-by this year." Big Mike spoke with a high-pitched voice on the wrong side of puberty. "Four bunks, couple of rattle reels, nice, big center hole, just augured this morning." The boy, the man and Big Mike sat around a card table in the kitchenette of a mobile home on the southwest bank of Lake Mille Lacs—Big Mike's office. The flimsy table creaked and wobbled under the force of Big Mike's ham-sized arm as he filled out the rental form.

"What's biting?" the man said.

Big Mike stopped writing and leaned in close to the boy. A mix of chewing tobacco, coffee and bait fish filled the boy's nose. "Your dad really think he's gonna catch anything but eelpout again this year?" He winked. "Go ahead. Ask your father, boy."

The boy met his step-father's eyes momentarily. They both looked away.

Big Mike flicked his eyes back and forth between them. "Crappie," he said, "Big ones. Guy pulled out a monster last weekend. Fourteen-incher." He bent over the form again. "Two nights, right?"

"Right," the man said.

Big Mike scratched a red 'X' across the bottom of the form and turned it around and slid it across the table. He set aside a white mug half-full of brown sludge—coffee or tobacco spit, the boy couldn't tell—and lifted the pages of the desk-sized calendar underneath. The top page was wrinkled and stained with an endless chain of coffee rings. "Same time next year?" Big Mike said.

The man signed the form as he spoke. "Not gonna make it."

"Well, hell. I was only kidding about the eelpout." Big Mike winked at the boy. "Moving?"

The boy watched his step-father's reaction. The man's gaze drifted up to Big Mike but looked through him. He squinted, as though attempting to focus on thin air—a ghost maybe. "No. Not moving."

"Well, you're a fountain of information, ain't ya'?" said Big Mike. He pulled the form back and ripped off the carbon and slapped it on a pile of similar carbons. The card table bounced.

At this, the man snapped back from wherever he was. "I'll be here in spirit," he said.

"Spirits don't pay the bills." Big Mike stood and turned to the lake map duct-taped to the wall.

"True." The man glanced at the boy, but the boy stuffed his hands in his coverall pockets and stared at the map. It was dotted with red pins.

"Right," Big Mike said. "The ice is eighteen inches all the way out. No fissures I know of." He traced a hand-drawn red line on the map with a stubby finger. "Just follow the plowed road about

three-quarter a mile out on the lake. You'll see the house. It's the only one out there yet." He tapped on one of the red pins. "There's some drunks out there." He flipped his head toward the lake and rolled his eyes. "Some boys renting from Kenny's. They're further out, a good quarter mile up the same road, but they're there."

The boy and the man stood. Big Mike grabbed the man's hand. "Guess I won't be seeing you."

"It'd be a miracle." The man smiled.

"It'd be a miracle if you caught something." Big Mike winked once more at the boy.

As they walked out the boy looked over his shoulder and saw Big Mike lift the sludge-filled mug to his mouth. He pursed his lips and spit a brown stream of tobacco into it.

The man usually let the boy drive on the lake, but this day the man slid behind the wheel. "Your mom made me promise," he said.

The boy shrugged and climbed in the passenger side.

The man brought the Ford F-150 to life. "No seat belt and keep your door cracked."

"I know."

"We're not going in. I'm just sayin'. If we do—"

"I know."

The truck tires crunched over a thin blanket of snow that had fallen on the lake that morning. The Ford's big-block engine droned and hummed in a deep, throaty voice. The man's key ring tick-ticked rhythmically against the steering column. And the boy's thoughts drifted back to the night before. Back to his promise.

His mother sat next to him on his bed. "It will make him happy," she said.

"I know," the boy said.

"He loves you."

The boy twisted the frayed threads that bordered a knee hole in his jeans.

"Do it for me. He needs to hear it." His mother's soft fingers cradled his chin and lifted his head. Her eyes pleaded. "Just say it for me."

"Mom."

"I know it's hard," she said.

"Geez." He ripped his head from her grip.

"He deserves to hear it." She reached for a pillow.

He went back to the hole in his jeans.

"He's raised you. He loves you." She fluffed the pillow and a puff of air filled with the lilac smell of his mother's favorite dryer sheets blew across his face. "He's a good man."

"I know."

"You'll miss him." She placed the pillow straight against the headboard and patted it flat the way the boy liked it. "I'll miss him." Then she wrapped her hands on both sides of his face and turned it to hers and leaned in. They were nose to nose. Her eyes threatened to overflow. "Promise me."

He tried to turn away again, but she tightened her grip.

"Promise." A tear spilled over her eyelash and fell warm and wet on the back of his hand. "Please." Her chin began to quiver.

"Okay."

The brakes squeaked and the Ford F-150 rolled to a stop beside the fish house.

The boy's feet became cold on the second night. It was always the second night. His thick winter boots were no use after a full day on the ice. He leaned back and propped his calves on the bait bucket. His feet dangled in front of the heater element—a glowing, red hot sunflower attached to the top of the propane tank.

"Don't cook 'em," the man said.

"I know. I won't."

"Just sayin'."

"Yeah. I know. I won't."

The heater continued to hiss.

"It's late," the man said.

"I know."

"You want a sip?" The beer sloshed against the walls of the aluminum can when the man held it out to the boy.

"No."

"You can have a sip."

"No."

The man tipped the can back and drank the rest of the beer. He shoved the empty can in the plastic sack. It clinked against the other cans in the bag. "It's late," he said.

"Yeah."

"What time you think?"

"Don't know."

"Guess."

"Midnight? One, maybe?"

The man pulled out the wristwatch with the busted leather strap he kept in his pocket and tapped the crystal a few times the way he always did. "Midnight," the man said. "You can't stay up this late at home you know? Your mother wouldn't have it." He shoved it back in his pocket.

"I know." As the boy said it, his bobber jittered in the black water. His heart skipped. "The bait?" he said.

"No," the man said. And his eyes widened.

"Sure?"

"Yeah, keep watching. Don't move."

Then the bobber sunk deep and popped back. The boy pulled back the rod and set the hook the way the man taught him. The weight of the fish was there. It was heavy and it ran for the bottom.

"Got it?"

"Yeah," the boy said.

"What is it?"

"Eelpout."

"Sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"Bastard," the man said.

The boy brought the fish up. It sloshed around the hole and the boy squeezed its back and used the fishing pliers and pulled the hook from its thick ugly lips with a hollow snap.

"Good." The man watched the boy. "Nice, son."

The boy felt the warmth of his step-father's proud, brown eyes wash over him. And he wondered if he should say it—if now was the moment. Then the man's coughing came again.

When his hacking began to recede, the man raised up in his chair and put his hands on his knees. His face was painted barn red and sweat prickled across his brow. He spoke slowly between deep rattled breaths. "Don't ever smoke." He wheezed. "It'll kill you." He grinned at his own joke and wiped his mouth with a red handkerchief to hide the blood. "I'm sorry."

The boy shrugged and held up the eelpout. "I'll take it out. I have to go, anyway." He went out around the back side of the fish house and tossed the eelpout on the ice next to the two others from the day. He dropped the arms of his coveralls and unzipped his fly. Steam rose from his urine as it splashed against the fishes' slick skin.

He pulled the arms of his coveralls over his shoulders and looked out across the lake expecting nothing but gray ice sprawled out before him in the darkness. Instead the lake was glowing. He craned his neck to look for the source of the light above.

Ribbons of light unfurled across the night sky above him. The color and shape of the light changed in ways the boy had never seen and didn't understand. They were blue and green and gold all at once. The boy gazed slack-jawed and the sky burned in slow motion above him. His eyes stung from the arctic air grating across them, but he didn't blink. He'd seen pictures of the Northern Lights in science books. But what was happening above the boy seemed to have little to do with science. The images in his book were more real. This was harder to grasp. A mystery. An apparition.

He thought of his father then. His true father.

Vague images came to him.

Muscular shoulders rolling beneath him, steering him through the swirling lights of a carnival midway. Thick, calloused fingers forming the shapes of insects that crawled up his arms and tickled his neck. The lilac perfume of a plaid work shirt and the softness of it against his cheek.

His mother, chin quivering, coming into his room, kneeling down, prying the yellow Tonka truck from his hand and trying to explain something. Something about an accident at the worksite. Waiting by the door every night. Watching the sun fall through the kitchen window. Waiting for his father to throw the door open and drop his red-and-white cooler on the kitchen table and sweep him up into his arms and press his stubbly face into his belly and give him a raspberry. Watching the sun always fall too far. Seeing the sky turn black. Asking why his father never came. Listening to his mother try to explain again.

The lights in the sky continued to stretch like bands of taffy above the boy. And then there were voices he couldn't understand. He cocked his ear to the sky. The voices seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, but they were no louder than a whisper. They sang at first and laughed. Then it seemed to the boy they became angry. A flurry of ice crystals carried on a gust of wind peppered the boy's neck making his spine stiffen, but still he didn't blink.

"Did you show the ugly bastard?" His step-father was still in the fish house, but his voice came clear and crisp as though he were standing next to him. A trick of the thin, frigid air.

"Yeah," the boy said.

"Good," the man said. "You having conversations with dead fish now?"

The boy's eyes were fixed on the light above him. "No," he said.

A loud crack echoed across the lake. And then there were two more—crack, crack.

"What was it?" the boy said. He lifted his head from his bunk.

"Maybe fireworks. The drunks maybe."

"It was too loud."

"Probably just the drunks." The man had still been fishing. He set his rod on the floor; the tip dangled over the hole in the ice. He swung the door open and stuck his head outside. Cold air filled the tiny room and made the boy's skin goose-pimple. After a few seconds, the man pulled the door shut again. "I'll check it."

"No." The boy darted up on the edge of his bunk.

"It's okay. I'll check." The man threw on his coat. His eyes jumped around the room searching for something.

"You said it was firecrackers. Just the drunks you said."

"I know. I'll check. It's probably nothing." The man pulled his pack from beneath his bunk and threw it on top and dug out an orange knit hat.

"I'll come." The boy slid the straps of his coveralls over his shoulders.

"No, you stay here." The man pulled the hat down over his ears.

"I want to come," said the boy.

"No, just stay. It's okay." His eyes pierced the boy.

"No."

The man opened the door and turned. "I promised your mother," he said. "It's okay, son," He spoke in a calm voice and there was the warmth the boy recognized in the man's eyes. The boy nodded and the man shut the door.

The man's boots crunched in the snow outside the thin wooden walls of the fish house. The boy heard him open the truck door and grab the duffle behind the seat and unzip it. There was a moment of silence followed by a metal click. The boy knew the sound. "You getting the rifle?"

"Slide the latch," the man said.

The truck door slammed heavy and hard, and the sound of snow crunching under the man's boots grew fainter. The boy felt the urge to call out—to say it then—but the footsteps disappeared. And it was silent again.

The boy dropped into his boots and went to the door and slid the barrel of the latch over, locking the door from the inside. He stood there for a while listening.

Eventually, he went back and sat on the edge of his bunk. He pulled the pocketknife from his coveralls and opened the blade and shut it. Over and over he repeated this, one-handed, the way the man had shown him in Montana when the rain came and endlessly beat on their tent walls like a pebbles poured from a bottomless bucket.

Every few minutes the boy stood again at the door and listened. Occasionally, he heard the deep groan of the ice shifting beneath him. An eerie sound, but he knew it and it comforted him.

Another gunshot rang out. This time much closer. Then there were two more— different, thinner. They belonged to his step-father's rifle, he recognized them. The boy's heart punched at his rib cage. Fear attempted to seize him on his bunk like giant invisible hands pressing down on him. But something greater than fear pulled him off it. Before he opened the door he paused and put his ear against it. No sound. He pushed the door open and stepped out onto the vast ice and squinted the direction of the shots. Black night, gray ice. He wanted to yell for his step-father, but thought better of it. He didn't want to be alone anymore, but he didn't want anyone to know he was there. The boy returned to his bunk in the fish house and waited.

Later, when the footsteps came, the boy knew they belonged to a stranger. They were too slow, too heavy. And they were uneven; one soft step, one hard. The boy went to the front door, put his weight against it, listened. The crunching of snow came closer. The boy pulled the pocketknife from his coveralls and opened the blade. But the stranger limped around the side of the fish house to the truck. The boy knew the old Ford F-150. The tacky feel of the sun-warmed plastic arm rest; the oily scent of the fake-leather seats; the rhythmic squeaks and rattles the truck made as it bounced along the Gunflint Trail or into Superior National Forest; the hiss of their tent and packs sliding back and forth across the truck bed. So when the stranger opened the truck door and rummaged through the cab, the boy knew exactly what was happening. He saw it in his mind.

The stranger opened the glove box—click—and the maps and papers and old trash inside fell to the floor of the truck. He pulled down the sun visors—creak, creak. He pried open the ash tray and spare change rattled. He went into the center console and flipped through CD's—slap, slap, slap. He groaned as he pulled the heavy seat back forward. He unzipped the empty canvas duffel behind the seat and shook it. The bag hit the snow. Then there was only the heavy breathing.

The boy knew why the stranger was here now. He closed his pocketknife softly and slid it back in the bib pocket of his coveralls. He took the pack from atop the man's bunk and quietly pushed it far underneath. Then he moved to the door and wrapped both hands around doorknob and held it tightly.

The stranger limped around the side of the fish house toward the front door. A pause. Then the sound of the stranger's coat scuffing against the door. The boy tightened his grip on the knob. It twisted and wiggled in the boy's grip like a slick fish. The stranger pulled. The latch held. The boy adjusted his grip and leaned back on his heels. Once more the knob wiggled in the boy's sweaty grip and the stranger pulled again—harder this time. The boy thought his arms might be jerked clean from their sockets. The latch rattled, but the door held. The boy's heart pounded against his ribcage like a trapped raccoon.

"Hello." The stranger's voice was pleasant—too pleasant. And sugary, the way people greet each other after church.

The boy didn't answer. The stranger's footsteps moved away from the door. Then he came fast and hard threw himself hard against it. The door held, but it shook violently and the boy lost his grip on the handle. He careened backward into the folding chair against rear wall of the fish house. Just as he was going to lunge for the door handle again the moulding splintered and the door exploded open into the room. The stranger stumbled into the fish house, almost falling over. He fixed his dark eyes on the boy for only a moment. Then he pulled a gun from the waist of his jeans and waved it wildly around the room as though searching for some real threat.

The stranger wore dark jeans tucked into winter boots. There was a small hole above the knee. Below it his jeans were slick with blood. The tufted shearling that lined the top of the boot was sopped in it. Thick streams oozed down the sides. With every step the stranger left a red waffle-patterned footprint in the carpet.

Ignoring the boy, the stranger found a metal folding chair. He shut the door and slid the chair over and dropped down in it blocking the only exit. Then he doubled-over and gripped his right thigh between his gun hand and his free hand and growled with fury. When the stranger rose up in his chair

again, he surveyed the small room more thoroughly. His dark eyes sucked in every detail. Then, finally, he turned them to the boy. "Did you see the apparitions?"

"W-what?"

"The apparitions. The dead souls." The stranger waved the barrel of his gun up at the plywood

ceiling of the fish house indicating the night sky outside. "I'm asking—did you see them?" "N-no." The boy pressed his arms against his body to control his shaking. "I-I don't know." His fingers wrapped around the knife in his bib pocket.

"You're lying." Melting snow and sweat dripped from the stranger's matted black hair. He wiped his brow with the back of his gun hand. "Pants on fire." His lips parted into an unnaturally broad grin. His big teeth were stained the yellow of antique dominoes. His face was pale, bloodless. His eyes black, two bottomless pits ripped into the earth. "You saw the dead souls, same as me, son."

The stranger gazed at the boy sitting across from him. An arctic wind swept in from the far side of the frozen lake. It whispered threats through the gaps in the shoddy wooden walls and pried at the plywood door making it rattle.

The stranger cocked his ear to the door. "They're angry." He turned his empty stare to the hole in the ice between them. It was rimmed with white slush. The ice fishing rod the man had been using lay across the blue and black speckled carpet, its tip dangling over the hole. Wrinkles appeared in the water as the fishing line wiggled and twitched—the bait struggling on the hook below. The stranger seemed in a trance. "They sang. Did you hear them?"

The boy trembled against his will. "N-no, sir." He tightened his grip on the knife.

"You can drop the formalities." The stranger screwed his eyes up to the boy. "I'm the devil, son." He hacked and spit. Slush-ice sucked up his blood-tinged saliva like a snow cone sucking up cherry syrup. "The man out there." The stranger gestured toward the door with a nod. "Was that your father?"

"No."

The stranger laughed and coughed and spit up more blood. The corners of his mouth pulled back to his ears. "The devil knows a liar, son." The stranger pushed back the wet strands of his hair with the tip of his gun. "He was your father."

"No."

"Okay, son. Okay." The stranger twisted his neck and gazed in every corner of the fish house. "Then tell me: what's a fatherless little bastard like you doing out on the ice all alone?"

The boy's heart tightened into a fist and hot blood rushed to his head.

"He was your daddy. He told me so."

The boy's temples throbbed.

"He got me good." The stranger tapped the barrel of the gun on his right thigh. "And looky here." He spread open his down coat and leaned back. The folding chair creaked. Under his rib cage a dark red stain radiated like a star from a hole in his waffle-knit undershirt. He lifted the shirt revealing a round hole in his flesh. The stranger inspected the edge of wound with his fingers and it regurgitated blood.

The boy trembled. He clenched his teeth to stop it.

"He was brave." The stranger pulled the shirt down and his eyes drifted into space. "He wasn't one of them." Then he pointed the gun at the boy. His arm raised only inches from his lap. "I need the keys to the truck, son. You have them."

"I don't."

"You do."

The boy ran his fingers over the knife in his pocket. He pictured the smooth mother-of-pearl handle in his head. "I swear. I don't."

"Didn't your daddy teach you not to swear? You'll go to hell." The stranger laughed hard. The stench of his alcohol-laced breath reached across the tiny room. The laughter eroded into a fit of wet hacking. A string of red spit dangled from the stranger's lower lip. "You know why I'm here?"

The boy didn't speak.

"The apparitions sent me. They told me I'd find you here. Said I'd find a liar. Said I should send the liar to Hell. Like all bastard liars—all fatherless bastard liars!" He laughed and hacked and spit another red stain onto the ice.

The boy flipped the blade of the knife open in his pocket.

"I see the dark spot on you. You're marked, son."

"I don't . . . I'm not—"

"Only liars have the dark spot. I see it on them. I saw it on all of them." The stranger stared in the direction of the other ice house. "Just like the apparitions said."

The boy tightened his grip on the knife. "W-why?"

"I told you. I'm telling you. Listen."

"You're drunk. Please."

"I'm taking the liars to Hell. The apparitions—the dead souls—they spoke to me same as you."

"They didn't. He's not my father. I sw—I promise it. I don't have the keys. I'm not lying."

The stranger's eyelids were heavy. He glanced around the fish house as he spoke. "Nice eelpout out there. Looks like you showed the ugly bastard." His head dropped and he rolled his eyes up at the boy. "I checked your daddy's pockets, son. After I killed him."

"You didn't!" The boy blurted it out and snot and spit came out from the force of it.

The stranger reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the wristwatch with the busted band and dangled it in front of the boy like a hypnotist. He tapped the crystal with the barrel of his gun. "Thing doesn't work. Did you know that?" He tossed it forward. For a moment it lay on the slush that rimmed the fishing hole. Then it slid into the black water leaving only a few concentric rings on the surface

The boy's chin began to quiver. "H-he has the keys."

"How old are you?"

The boy didn't speak.

"Twelve, I'd guess," the stranger said. His eye lids dropped and his head bobbed like a man falling asleep on a train. "Listen, I'm going to kill you and you're only twelve. I'm going to kill you, because..." His head bobbed again, ". . . because I'm the devil and I don't care. I'm already going to Hell. Do you understand?"

The boy watched the last of the concentric rings in the surface of the water dissipate and pulled the knife from his pocket and pointed it at the stranger.

"Get the keys and drive me, son." He held the gun up from his lap. It was at a strange angle and it was shaking now. He dropped it back in his lap.

"You won't shoot me." The boy's voice cracked when he spoke. "Y-you'll die then."

"I'm going to Hell. I don't care. But you are a liar and..." The stranger's eyes fell shut and his head dropped for a moment. Then he raised it again. "You're headed there, too. And you care."

"I don't have them—"

An explosion rang out. The sound slapped off wooden walls. The boy curled in his chair, his hands flying to his ears. His pocketknife dropped into the hole in the ice. The stink of spent gun powder filled the room.

Wisps of white smoke rose from his gun, but the stranger was slumped in his chair like a discarded puppet; his neck bent, chin resting on his shoulder. The boy brought his feet back to the floor and leaned forward in his chair making it creak. At the sound, the stranger lifted his head and his lips parted and his big domino teeth spread wide across his face. "I'm going to Hell." The stranger wheezed and his chest heaved. "And you are too, boy." Another shot rang out. The bullet struck one of the rattle reels on the wall behind the boy. It spun and clattered. "You're a liar." The stranger coughed and a waterfall of blood poured out of his mouth and down his chin. "He's your father." Then the the stranger slumped in his chair and his head remained still but his eyes moved looking everywhere and nowhere. Finally, he fixed his gaze on the black hole in the ice and said something the boy couldn't understand. And he was still again.

The boy jumped from his chair, pulled his step-father's pack from under the bunk, unzipped the front pocket and snatched the keys to the truck there.

His step-father's orange knit cap was the first thing the boy saw. It stuck up from a snow drift. The boy stopped the truck and ran out to him and knelt down next to him.

"Hey." He shook him. The man's eyes were open, but there was no response. A ball of fear forced itself up in the boy's chest. "Wake up!" The words came with an explosion of snot and saliva.

Finally, the man spoke. "D-did he come?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"We have to go."

"I'm sorry."

"You have to move." The boy grabbed the man's arms and tried to pull him toward the truck, but he could no more move him than a mountain.

"Stop it," the man said.

"I brought the truck."

"You leave your belt off and crack the door?"

"Yeah."

"Good." The man looked into space. "I promised her."

"Can you move?"

"I'll try." The man didn't move at all. "Did it work?"

"No."

"I think I shot him."

"You killed him."

"But he came?"

"Yes."

"I tried to stop him. I couldn't stop him."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

"He's dead."

Blood seeped from the corners of the man's mouth. His lips were red from it. "Tastes like I ate a rusty pipe."

"Can you move?"

"I am."

"No."

"I'm a stinking eelpout," the man said.

"Ugly bastard."

A drop of blood that had clung to the corner of the man's mouth was released when he smiled. It carved its way through his whiskers then dropped from his jaw onto the snow. "Don't cry, son."

"I'm sorry."

"I would be gone soon anyway."

"I know. I'm...I'm just sorry."

"Stop being sorry." The man's eyes filled the boy with warmth.

The boy reached out and pulled off the man's knit cap and put his hands in the man's soft graying hair and he said it then. "Dad."

The man closed his eyes and smiled. "She made you promise."

"No."

"Liar."

With the heat of his last breath a white vapor ghost rose from the man's lips and vanished in the cold air.