

VII  FLICK OFFERS ME HARD LIQUOR

"You sure you don't want a shot? A little bourbon maybe?" Flick asked, oozing sympathy. He went on:

"Do you remember the time Jane Hutchinson left me standing in a snowdrift for four hours? While she had a date with Claude Eaton!"


"Whatever happened to her?"

"I hear she moved out somewhere near Cedar Lake." Flick mopped the bar pensively.

"Cedar Lake! I haven't heard of Cedar Lake for years! The Dance Hall! The Roller Rink! The Smell! Is it still out there, Flick? How is Cedar Lake?"

Flick paused meaningfully in his swabbing, savoring to the full his next statement.

"Cedar Lake. It's the first time I ever heard of 'em doing it to a lake. It's Condemned."

VIII  HAIRY GERTZ AND THE FORTY-SEVEN CRAPPIES

Life, when you're a Male kid, is what the Grownups are doing. The Adult world seems to be some kind of secret society that has its own passwords, handclasps, and countersigns. The thing is to get In. But there's this invisible, impenetrable wall between you and all the great, unimaginably swinging things that they seem to be involved in. Occasionally mutterings of exotic secrets and incredible pleasures filter through. And so you bang against it, throw rocks at it, try to climb over it, burrow under it; but there it is. Impenetrable. Enigmatic.

Girls somehow seem to be already involved, as though from birth they've got the Word. Lolita has no Male counterpart. It does no good to protest and pretend otherwise. The fact is inescapable. A male kid is really a *kid*. A female kid is a *girl*. Some guys give up early in life, surrender completely before the impassable transparent wall, and remain little kids forever. They are called "Fags," or "Homosexuals," if you are in polite society.

The rest of us have to claw our way into Life as best we can, never knowing when we'll be Admitted. It happens to each of us in different ways—and once it does, there's no turning back.

It happened to me at the age of twelve in Northern Indiana—a remarkably barren terrain resembling in some ways the sur-

face of the moon, encrusted with steel mills, oil refineries, and honky-tonk bars. There was plenty of natural motivation for Total Escape. Some kids got hung up on kite flying, others on pool playing. I became the greatest vicarious angler in the history of the Western world.

I say vicarious because there just wasn't any actual fishing to be done around where I lived. So I would stand for hours in front of the goldfish tank at Woolworth's, landing fantails in my mind, after incredible struggles. I read *Field & Stream*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Sports Afield* the way other kids read *G-8 And His Battle Aces*. I would break out in a cold sweat reading about these guys portaging to Alaska and landing rare salmon; and about guys climbing the High Sierras to do battle with the wily golden trout; and mortal combat with the steelheads. I'd read about craggy, sinewy sportsmen who discover untouched bass lakes where they have to beat off the pickerel with an oar, and the saber-toothed, raging smallmouths chase them ashore and right up into the woods.

After reading one of these fantasies I would walk around in a daze for hours, feeling the cork pistol grip of my imaginary trusty six-foot, split-bamboo bait-casting rod in my right hand and hearing the high-pitched scream of my Pflueger Supreme reel straining to hold a seventeen-pound Great Northern in check.

I became known around town as "the-kid-who-is-the-nut-on-fishing," even went to the extent of learning how to tie flies, although I'd never been fly casting in my life. I read books on the subject. And in my bedroom, while the other kids are making balsa models of Curtiss Robins, I am busy tying Silver Doctors, Royal Coachmen, and Black Gnats. They were terrible. I would try out one in the bathtub to see whether it made a ripple that might frighten off the wily rainbow.

"Glonk!"

Down to the bottom like a rock, my floating dry fly would go. Fishing was part of the mysterious and unattainable Adult world. I wanted In.

My Old Man was In, though he was what you might call a once-in-a-while-fisherman-and-beer-party-goer; they are the same thing in the shadow of the blast furnaces. (I knew even then that there are people who Fish and there are people who Go Fishing; they're two entirely different creatures.) My Old Man did not drive 1500 miles to the Atlantic shore with 3000 pounds of Abercrombie & Fitch fishing tackle to angle for stripers. He was the kind who would Go Fishing maybe once a month during the summer when it was too hot to Go Bowling and all of the guys down at the office would get The Itch. To them, fishing was a way of drinking a lot of beer and yelling. And getting away from the women. To me, it was a sacred thing. To fish.

He and these guys from the office would get together and go down to one of the lakes a few miles from where we lived—but never to Lake Michigan, which wasn't far away. I don't know why; I guess it was too big and awesome. In any case, nobody ever really thought of fishing in it. At least nobody in my father's mob. They went mostly to a mudhole known as Cedar Lake.

I will have to describe to you what a lake in the summer in Northern Indiana is like. To begin with, heat, in Indiana, is something else again. It descends like a 300-pound fat lady onto a picnic bench in the middle of July. It can literally be sliced into chunks and stored away in the basement to use in winter; on cold days you just bring it out and turn it on. Indiana heat is not a meteorological phenomenon—it is a solid element, something you can grab by the handles. Almost every day in the summer the whole town is just shimmering in front of you. You'd look across the street and skinny people would be all fat and wiggly like in the fun-house mirrors at Coney Island. The asphalt in the streets would bubble and hiss like a pot of steaming Ralston.

That kind of heat and sun produces mirages. All it takes is good flat country, a nutty sun, and insane heat and, by George, you're looking at Cleveland 200 miles away. I remember many times standing out in center field on an incinerating

day in mid-August, the prairie stretching out endlessly in all directions, and way out past the swamp would be this kind of tenuous, shadowy, cloud-like thing shimmering just above the horizon. It would be the Chicago skyline, upside down, just hanging there in the sky. And after a while it would gradually disappear.

So, naturally, fishing is different in Indiana. The muddy lakes, about May, when the sun starts beating down on them, would begin to simmer and bubble quietly around the edges. These lakes are not fed by springs or streams. I don't know what feeds them. Maybe seepage. Nothing but weeds and truck axles on the bottom; flat, low, muddy banks, surrounded by cottonwood trees, cattails, smelly marshes, and old dumps. Archetypal dumps. Dumps gravitate to Indiana lakes like flies to a hog killing. Way down at the end where the water is shallow and soupy are the old cars and the ashes, busted refrigerators, oil drums, old corsets, and God knows what else.

At the other end of the lake is the Roller Rink. There's *always* a Roller Rink. You can hear that old electric organ going, playing "Heartaches," and you can hear the sound of the roller skates:

"Shhhhhh . . . sssshhhhhhhh . . . sssshhhhhhhhhh-hhh. . ."

And the fistfights breaking out. The Roller Rink Nut in heat. The Roller Rink Nut was an earlier incarnation of the Drive-In Movie Nut. He was the kind who was very big with stainless steel diners, motels, horror movies, and frozen egg rolls. A close cousin to the Motorcycle Clod, he went ape for chicks with purple eyelids. You know the crowd. Crewcuts, low foreheads, rumbles, hollering, belching, drinking beer, roller skating on one foot, wearing black satin jackets with SOUTH SIDE A. C. lettered in white on the back around a white-winged roller-skated foot. The kind that hangs the stuff in the back windows of their '53 Mercuries; a huge pair of foam-rubber dice, a skull and crossbones, hula-hula dolls, and football players—Pro, of course, with heads that bob up and down. The guys with ball fringe around the windows of their cars, with phony

Venetian blinds in the back, and big white rubber mudguards hanging down, with red reflectors. Or they'll take some old heap and line it with plastic imitation mink fur, pad the steering wheel with leopard skin and ostrich feathers until it weighs seventeen pounds and is as fat as a salami. A TV set, a bar, and a folding Castro bed are in the trunk, automatically operated and all lined with tasteful Sears Roebuck ermine. You know the crew—a true American product. We turn them out like Campbell's Pork & Beans.

This is the system of aesthetics that brought the Roller Rink to Cedar Lake, Indiana, when I was a kid.

About 150 yards from the Roller Rink was the Cedar Lake Evening In Paris Dance Hall. Festering and steamy and thronged with yeasty refugees from the Roller Rink. These are the guys who can't skate. But they can do other things. They're down there jostling back and forth in 400-per-cent humidity to the incomparable sounds of an Indiana dancehall band. Twelve non-Union cretinous musicians—Mickey Iseley's Moonlight Serenaders—blowing "Red Sails In the Sunset" on Montgomery Ward altos. The lighting is a tasteful combination of naked light bulbs, red and blue crepe paper, and orange celophane gels.

In between the Roller Rink and the Dance Hall are seventeen small shacks known as Beer Halls. And surrounding this tiny oasis of civilization, this bastion of bonhomie, is a gigantic sea of total darkness, absolute pitch-black Stygian darkness, around this tiny island of totally decadent, bucolic American merriment. The roller skates are hissing, the beer bottles are crashing, the chicks are squealing, Mickey's reed men are quavering, and Life is full.

And in the middle of the lake, several yards away, are over 17,000 fishermen, in wooden rowboats rented at a buck and a half an hour. It is 2 A.M. The temperature is 175, with humidity to match. And the smell of decayed toads, the dumps at the far end of the lake, and an occasional *soupeçon* of Standard Oil, whose refinery is a couple of miles away, is enough to put hair on the back of a mud turtle. Seventeen thousand guys

clumped together in the middle, fishing for the known sixty-four crappies in that lake.

Crappies are a special breed of Midwestern fish, created by God for the express purpose of surviving in waters that would kill a bubonic-plague bacillus. They have never been known to fight, or even faintly struggle. I guess when you're a crappie, you figure it's no use anyway. One thing is as bad as another. They're just down there in the soup. No one quite knows what they eat, if anything, but everybody's fishing for them. At two o'clock in the morning.

Each boat contains a minimum of nine guys and fourteen cases of beer. And once in a while, in the darkness, is heard the sound of a guy falling over backward into the slime:

SSSSGLUNK!

"Oh! Ah! Help, help!" A piteous cry in the darkness. Another voice:

"Hey, for God's sake, Charlie's fallen in again! Grab the oar!"

And then it slowly dies down. Charlie is hauled out of the goo and is lying on the bottom of the boat, urping up dead lizards and Atlas Prager. Peace reigns again.

The water in these lakes is not the water you know about. It is composed of roughly ten per cent waste glop spewed out by Shell, Sinclair, Phillips, and the Grasselli Chemical Corporation; twelve per cent used detergent; thirty-five per cent thick gruel composed of decayed garter snakes, deceased toads, fermenting crappies, and a strange, unidentifiable liquid that holds it all together. No one is quite sure *what* that is, because everybody is afraid to admit what it really is. They don't want to look at it too closely.

So this *mélange* lays there under the sun, and about August it is slowly simmering like a rich mulligatawny stew. At two in the morning you can hear the water next to the boat in the darkness:

"Gluuummp . . . Bluuuummp."

Big bubbles of some unclassified gas come up from the bot-

tom and burst. The natives, in their superstitious way, believe that it is highly inflammable. They take no chances.

The saddest thing of all is that on these lakes there are usually about nineteen summer cottages to the square foot, each equipped with a large motorboat. The sound of a 40-horsepower Chris-Craft going through a sea of number-ten oil has to be heard to be believed.

RRRRRRRAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHWWWWWWWWWWWRRRRRRRRRR-
r!

The prow is sort of parting the stuff, slowly stirring it into a sluggish, viscous wake.

Natives actually *swim* in this water. Of course, it is impossible to swim near the shore, because the shore is one great big sea of mud that goes all the way down to the core of the earth. There are stories of whole towns being swallowed up and stored in the middle of the earth. So the native rows out to the middle of the lake and hurls himself off the back seat of his rowboat.

"GLURP!"

It is impossible to sink in this water. The specific gravity and surface tension make the Great Salt Lake seem dangerous for swimming. You don't sink. You just bounce a little and float there. You literally have to hit your head on the surface of these lakes to get under a few inches. Once you do, you come up streaming mosquito eggs and dead toads—an Indiana specialty—and all sorts of fantastic things which are the offshoot of various exotic merriments which occur outside the Roller Rink.

The bottom of the lake is composed of a thick incrustation of old beer cans. The beer cans are at least a thousand feet thick in certain places.

And so 17,000 fishermen gather in one knot, because it is rumored that here is where The Deep Hole is. All Indiana lakes have a Deep Hole, into which, as the myth goes, the fish retire to sulk in the hot weather. Which is always.

Every month or so an announcement would be made by my Old Man, usually on a Friday night, after work.

"I'm getting up early tomorrow morning. I'm going fishing."

Getting up early and going fishing with Hairy Gertz and the crowd meant getting out of the house about three o'clock in the afternoon, roughly. Gertz was a key member of the party. He owned the Coleman lamp. It was part of the folklore that if you had a bright lantern in your boat the fish could not resist it. The idea was to hold the lantern out over the water and the fish would have to come over to see what was going on. Of course, when the fish arrived, there would be your irresistible worm, and that would be it.

Well, these Coleman lamps may not have drawn fish, but they worked great on mosquitoes. One of the more yeasty experiences in Life is to occupy a tiny rented rowboat with eight other guys, knee-deep in beer cans, with a blinding Coleman lamp hanging out of the boat, at 2 A.M., with the lamp hissing like Fu Manchu about to strike and every mosquito in the Western Hemisphere descending on you in the middle of Cedar Lake.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZTTTTTTTTTTT

They *love* Coleman lamps. In the light they shed the mosquitoes swarm like rain. And in the darkness all around there'd be other lights in other boats, and once in a while a face would float above one. Everyone is coated with an inch and a half of something called citronella, reputedly a mosquito repellent but actually a sort of mosquito salad dressing.

The water is absolutely flat. There has not been a breath of air since April. It is now August. The surface is one flat sheet of old used oil laying in the darkness, with the sounds of the Roller Rink floating out over it, mingling with the angry drone of the mosquitoes and muffled swearing from the other boats. A fistfight breaks out at the Evening In Paris. The sound of sirens can be heard faintly in the Indiana blackness. It gets louder and then fades away. Tiny orange lights bob over the dance floor.

"Raaahhhhd sails in the sawwwwnnnnsehht. . ."

It's the drummer who sings. He figures some day Ted Weems will be driving by, and hear him, and. . .

". . . haaaahhhwww brightly they shinnee. . ."

There is nothing like a band vocalist in a rotten, struggling Mickey band. When you've heard him over 2000 yards of soupy, oily water, filtered through fourteen billion feeding mosquitoes in the August heat, he is particularly juicy and ripe. He is overloading the ten-watt Allied Radio Knight amplifier by at least 400 per cent, the gain turned all the way up, his chrome-plated bullet-shaped crystal mike on the edge of feedback.

"Raaahhhhd sails in the sawwwwnnnnsehht. . ."

It is the sound of the American night. And to a twelve-year-old kid it is exciting beyond belief.

Then my Old Man, out of the blue, says to me:

"You know, if you're gonna come along, you got to clean the fish."

Gonna come along! My God! I wanted to go fishing more than anything else in the world, and my Old Man wanted to drink beer more than anything else in the world, and so did Gertz and the gang, and more than even *that*, they wanted to get away from all the women. They wanted to get out on the lake and tell dirty stories and drink beer and get eaten by mosquitoes; just sit out there and sweat and be Men. They wanted to get away from work, the car payments, the lawn, the mill, and everything else.

And so here I am, in the dark, in a rowboat with The Men. I am half-blind with sleepiness. I am used to going to bed at nine-thirty or ten o'clock, and here it is two, three o'clock in the morning. I'm squatting in the back end of the boat, with 87,000,000 mosquitoes swarming over me, but I am *fishing!* I am out of my skull with fantastic excitement, hanging onto my pole.

In those days, in Indiana, they fished with gigantic cane poles. They knew not from Spinning. A cane pole is a long bamboo pole that's maybe twelve or fifteen feet in length; it weighs a ton, and tied to the end of it is about thirty feet of thick green line, roughly half the weight of the average clothesline, three big lead sinkers, a couple of crappie hooks, and a bobber.

One of Sport's most exciting moments is when 7 Indiana

fishermen in the same boat simultaneously and without consulting one another decide to pull their lines out of the water and recast. In total darkness. First the pole, rising like a huge whip:

"Whooooooooooooooooop!"

Then the lines, whirling overhead:

"Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeoooooooooo!"

And then:

"OH! FOR CHRISAKE! WHAT THE HELL?"

Clunk! CLONK!

Sound of cane poles banging together, and lead weights landing in the boat. And such brilliant swearing as you have never heard. Yelling, hollering, with somebody always getting a hook stuck in the back of his ear. And, of course, all in complete darkness, the Coleman lamp at the other end of the rowboat barely penetrating the darkness in a circle of three or four feet.

"Hey, for God's sake, Gertz, will ya tell me when you're gonna pull your pole up! Oh, Jesus Christ, look at this mess!"

There is nothing worse than trying to untangle seven cane poles, 200 feet of soggy green line, just as they are starting to hit in the other boats. Sound carries over water:

"Shhhhh! I got a bite!"

The fishermen with the tangled lines become frenzied. Fingernails are torn, hooks dig deeper into thumbs, and kids huddle terrified out of range in the darkness.

You have been sitting for twenty hours, and nothing. A bobber just barely visible in the dark water is one of the most beautiful sights known to man. It's not doing anything, but there's always the feeling that at any instant it might. It just lays out there in the darkness. A luminous bobber, a beautiful thing, with a long, thin quill and a tiny red-and-white float, with just the suggestion of a line reaching into the black water. These are special bobbers for *very* tiny fish.

I have been watching my bobber so hard and so long in the darkness that I am almost hypnotized. I have not had a bite—ever—but the excitement of being there is enough for me, a kind of delirious joy that has nothing to do with sex or any of the

more obvious pleasures. To this day, when I hear some guy singing in that special drummer's voice, it comes over me. It's two o'clock in the morning again. I'm a kid. I'm tired. I'm excited. I'm having the time of my life.

And at the other end of the lake:

"Raaahhhhd sails in the sawwwwnnnnsehht. . . ."

The Roller Rink drones on, and the mosquitoes are humming. The Coleman lamp sputters, and we're all sitting together in our little boat.

Not really together, since I am a kid, and they are Men, but at least I'm there. Gertz is stewed to the ears. He is down at the other end. He has this fantastic collection of rotten stories, and early in the evening my Old Man keeps saying:

"There's a kid with us, you know."

But by two in the morning all of them have had enough so that it doesn't matter. They're telling stories, and I don't care. I'm just sitting there, clinging to my cane pole when, by God, I get a nibble!

I don't believe it. The bobber straightens up, jiggles, dips, and comes to rest in the gloom. I whisper:

"I got a bite!"

The storytellers look up from their beer cans in the darkness.

"What . . . ? Hey, whazzat?"

"Shhhhh! Be quiet!"

We sit in silence, everybody watching his bobber through the haze of insects. The drummer is singing in the distance. We hang suspended for long minutes. Then suddenly all the bobbers dipped and went under. The crappies are hitting!

You never saw anything like it! We are pulling up fish as fast as we can get them off the hooks. Crappies are flying into the boat, one after the other, and hopping around on the bottom in the darkness, amid the empty beer cans. Within twenty minutes we have landed forty-seven fish. We are knee-deep in crappies. The jackpot!

Well, the Old Man just goes wild. They are all yelling and screaming and pulling the fish in—while the other boats around us are being skunked. The fish have come out of their hole or

whatever it is that they are in at the bottom of the lake, the beer cans and the old tires, and have decided to eat.

You can hear the rest of the boats pulling up anchors and rowing over, frantically. They are thumping against us. There's a big, solid phalanx of wooden boats around us. You could walk from one boat to the other for miles around. And still they are skunked. We are catching the fish!

By 3 A.M. they've finally stopped biting, and an hour later we are back on land. I'm falling asleep in the rear seat between Gertz and Zudock. We're driving home in the dawn, and the men are hollering, drinking, throwing beer cans out on the road, and having a great time.

We are back at the house, and my father says to me as we are coming out of the garage with Gertz and the rest of them:

"And now Ralph's gonna clean the fish. Let's go in the house and have something to eat. Clean 'em on the back porch, will ya, kid?"

In the house they go. The lights go on in the kitchen; they sit down and start eating sandwiches and making coffee. And I am out on the back porch with forty-seven live, flopping crappies.

They are well named. Fish that are taken out of muddy, rotten, lousy, stinking lakes are muddy, rotten, lousy, stinking fish. It is as simple as that. And they are made out of some kind of hard rubber.

I get my Scout knife and go to work. Fifteen minutes and twenty-one crappies later I am sick over the side of the porch. But I do not stop. It is part of Fishing.

By now, nine neighborhood cats and a raccoon have joined me on the porch, and we are all working together. The August heat, now that we are away from the lake, is even hotter. The uproar in the kitchen is getting louder and louder. There is nothing like a motley collection of Indiana office workers who have just successfully defeated Nature and have brought home the kill. Like cave men of old, they celebrate around the campfire with song and drink. And belching.

I have now finished the last crappie and am wrapping the

clean fish in the editorial page of the *Chicago Tribune*. It has a very tough paper that doesn't leak. Especially the editorial page.

The Old Man hollers out:

"How you doing? Come in and have a Nehi."

I enter the kitchen, blinded by that big yellow light bulb, weighted down with a load of five-and-a-half-inch crappies, covered with fish scales and blood, and smelling like the far end of Cedar Lake. There are worms under my fingernails from baiting hooks all night, and I am feeling at least nine feet tall. I spread the fish out on the sink—and old Hairy Gertz says:

"My God! Look at those *speckled beauties!*" An expression he had picked up from *Outdoor Life*.

The Old Man hands me a two-pound liverwurst sandwich and a bottle of Nehi orange. Gertz is now rolling strongly, as are the other eight file clerks, all smelly, and mosquito-bitten, eyes red-rimmed from the Coleman lamp, covered with worms and with the drippings of at least fifteen beers apiece. Gertz hollers:

"Ya know, lookin' at them fish reminds me of a story." He is about to uncork his cruddiest joke of the night. They all lean forward over the white enamel kitchen table with the chipped edges, over the salami and the beer bottles, the rye bread and the mustard. Gertz digs deep into his vast file of obscenity.

"One time there was this Hungarian bartender, and ya know, he had a cross-eyed daughter and a bowlegged dachshund. And this. . . ."

At first I am holding back, since I am a kid. The Old Man says:

"Hold it down, Gertz. You'll wake up the wife and she'll raise hell."

He is referring to My Mother.

Gertz lowers his voice and they all scrunch their chairs forward amid a great cloud of cigar smoke. There is only one thing to do. I scrunch forward, too, and stick my head into the huddle, right next to the Old Man, into the circle of leering,

snickering, fishy-smelling faces. Of course, I do not even remotely comprehend the gist of the story. But I know that it is rotten to the core.

Gertz belts out the punch line; the crowd bellows and beats on the table. They begin uncapping more Blatz.

Secretly, suddenly, and for the first time, I realize that I am In. The Eskimo pies and Nehi oranges are all behind me, and a whole new world is stretching out endlessly and wildly in all directions before me. I have gotten The Signall!

Suddenly my mother is in the doorway in her Chinese-red chenille bathrobe. Ten minutes later I am in the sack, and out in the kitchen Gertz is telling another one. The bottles are rattling, and the file clerks are hunched around the fire celebrating their primal victory over The Elements.

Somewhere off in the dark the Monon Louisville Limited wails as it snakes through the Gibson Hump on its way to the outside world. The giant Indiana moths, at least five pounds apiece, are banging against the window screens next to my bed. The cats are fighting in the backyard over crappie heads, and fish scales are itching in my hair as I joyfully, ecstatically slide off into the great world beyond.

IX ☞ I INTRODUCE FLICK TO THE ART WORLD

"It hasn't changed a bit," Flick said.

Two truckdrivers had taken places at the far end of the bar. Flick ambled down; served them up a pair of boilermakers. One of them got up immediately, crossed to the jukebox, dropped in a coin, pressed the buttons, and returned to his stool. Immediately a wavering reddish-purple light filled the room as the enormous plastic jukebox glowed into vivid neon life. Waterfalls cascaded through its plastic sides. I watched it for a moment, and, forgetting where I was, said:

"Pure Pop Art."

Flick paused in his glass-polishing.

"Pure what?"

It was too late to back out.

"Pop Art, Flick. Pure Pop Art. That jukebox."

"What's Pop Art?"

"That's hard to explain, Flick. You've got to be With It."

"What do you mean? I'm With It."

I sipped my beer to stall for time.

"Flick, have you ever heard of the Museum of Modern Art in New York?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Well, Flick. . . ."