The grey marble of the sun rose slowly just giving enough light for him to see where the bow of the boat was going. The air smelled stale—humid air with a stench of rotting fish. As weedbeds passed by under the boat, the air smelled of freshly cut damp grass. The ancient aluminum boat creaked and rattled as the oars were lifted, swung, dipped into the water and pushed.

The floor of the boat was covered in green artificial turf that squashed underfoot and smelled of dead fish with spots of blood and fish scales littered here and there that caught the pale light. Along the sides of the boat were stacks of fishing poles. The tangled lines at the ends of the poles each had a brightly striped bobber with a pointy end.

The rowing stopped and with a crash, the oars were lifted and dropped in the bottom of the boat. The anchor was lifted with a grunt and heaved over the edge and the rope whizzed over the side of the boat.

The old man's frail hand shuffled through the pile of poles with great care. After he selected a pole, he reached under his seat and pulled out an Adams Dairy cottage cheese container with holes in the lid. He pulled out a thin, squirming redworm out of the sawdusty dirt. With a flick of the wrist, the line zinged into the air and plopped into the water with a quiet pop.

The man sat quietly, his body turned toward the side of the boat where the pole rested. He had a large forehead with a receding hairline that ended in a soft white puff of hair that blew in the breeze and landed in his eyes. The long forehead ended in a thin nose with a few curly hairs protruding out of the left nostril. The sparse eyebrows did little to cover the prominent wrinkles around his small, deeply set eyes. The eyes were tired, but gentle.

A dragonfly buzzed one sunburnt ear, but the man’s bent frame sat attentive to the fishing pole and didn’t even reach up to brush it away.

Humming “The Yellow Rose of Texas”, he gently lifted up his pole to check to see if the bait was still there and then lowered it back into the water.
A large, sleek speedboat idled along behind the fishing boat, slicing up the water with its pointed bow. The speedboat cut its engines, floated up against the aluminum boat and hit it with a gentle clanging thud.

The old man sat quietly with his back to the other boat. He didn't turn around, but the humming stopped.

A middle-aged man with the beginnings of a brunette mustache reached out and grabbed the side of the fishing boat, pulling it to him until the boats thumped each other again. He gently lifted one leg over the side of the fishing boat and then half-hopped the rest of the way in. The boat rocked from side to side.

He went over to the old man and put a hand on his shoulder. The old man stiffened.

Willie jolted in the bed and his eyes wrenched open. In the dark, he could barely make out the foot of his bed. A bathrobe lay draped over the metal footboard of the bed. Turning his head to the left he saw the shadowy shape of his roommate sleeping in the next bed. As usual, ole Ferd snored like prop planes Willie flew in World War I. Through the crack at the bottom of the door, soft light poured in from the hallway as one of the night staff walked by in crepe soles that made a swishing noise on the slick floor.

What was the dream he's been having. Oh, yes, he remembered it now--the fishing boat on Wyland Pond. What had made him dream about that again after all this time?

He pulled up the fuzzy blue blanket and closed his eyes.

Rise and Shine boys! It's 8:00. Time for breakfast. Now, Mr. Francis, Sharon will be down in a few seconds to help you take your bath. Meanwhile, Mr. Turner, you wash up and get dressed so you can be out of the bathroom before Mr. Francis takes his bath.

"OOOOOOHHHHH SHIT!!! Do I have to take my bath today?" Ferd mumbled into his pillow. "Can't I take my bath in private? Nobody can see me naked except my wife; oh yes, and that redhead that time in Manhattan.

"Now Mr. Francis, stop acting silly. Sharon will be down in a minute, be ready in the bathroom when she gets here."

Ferd sat up amidst the rumbled white sheets and swung his
legs over the edge of the bed. With one hand, he reached and pulled his walker toward him. He eased out of the bed and slowly walked to the bathroom where Willie was coming out.

"See you at breakfast," Willie said as he walked out the door.

As he walked down the sterile hallway, he glanced into different rooms and said good morning to several people.

The cafeteria was yellow with sunlight glancing off the white walls as twenty or twenty-five people sat at round tables nodding their heads and talking earnestly.

Willie got his breakfast and sat down at a table with a couple of women. One had a pink bathrobe with ruffles running down the front. The other had a green dress with a plastic zipper zipped up clear to her fleshy neck.

"And how are you beautiful ladies, this morning?" Willie asked.

Both women blushed visibly. "Why Willie, you old flirt. Always with the compliments aren't you?"

"Well with such beautiful breakfast companions as yourselfs, how can I help but be flattering?" Willie said.

"Ah, cut the bullshit, Willie. Every woman in this place knows your moves by now," said Ferd, shuffling up to the table while a nurse carried a square tray.

"Have a seat, Ferd. I was just discussing with these lovely ladies what a beautiful day it was. A nice day for a walk. Would anyone care to join me for a walk this morning?" Willie said.

"Have you forgotten, Willie," one of the women said, "it's spring festival day. My daughter and her husband will be here in about a half-hour."

"Well...yes. Of course I haven't forgotten," Willie said, "is your family coming too, Ferd?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I suppose they'll come up here with all this bullshit about how young I'm looking and shit like that. Frank's still wasting his life away farming that damn land. Why you can't coax a weed to grow in that rotten soil, so why even try?"

He thumped his blue-veined hand down on the tabletop. "Investments. That's where it's all at. It's the only place you'll ever make any money. Investments. That's how I made my living—managing my own investment firm—a real man's job."
Not leaving the city to work on a farm.

Ferd scowled so his white eyebrows cam together. “Sometimes I don’t know where I went wrong with that boy.”

“Is your family coming this year Willie?” one of the women asked.

“Oh, probably. They’re real busy, you know. Real busy,” Willie said, “Well, I’d better go and try to clean the room up before the families come.”

Willie walked back into the room and slumped into the vinyl green chair in front of the window. He tried to remember the last time he had seen his son and daughter-in-law. It must have been last Christmas. Yes, that was it. They hadn’t come for his birthday in February because Nick had had an important advertising campaign in Los Angeles and Carol had an appointment with a client.

Not that I don’t understand, of course, I can’t expect them to come running out here at every little whipstitch to satisfy me. They lead busy lives. But, still I do get lonely every once in awhile.

From the window, Willie could see cars pull up and brightly-dressed people stepping out of them. Balloons and tables were set up all over the lawn and a Dixieland band was playing under the old maple tree out front. The sun was shining brightly and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. He saw Ferd hobble out to the parking lot as a brunette heavy-set woman got out of the car and embraced him. Susan, Willie thought. He remembered all of Ferd’s family even though he had only met them a couple of times.

Maybe today, they’ll come, he thought. Especially since it’s the spring festival. Nick said they’d write it down on the calendar and make it if they could. I’ll move my chair over to the window so I can see them if they drive up. If they did come, I wouldn’t want to make them wait.

The sun was going down and orange light was pounding fiercely on the west side of the building. Bright light permeated the room and shone on Willie’s face waking him. His sweat face stuck to the green vinyl chair and his armpits ached from where his arms had been propped up on the window sill.

He felt a touch on his shoulder; he jumped and his head
snapped up.

“Hey, wake up, you old bastard,” Ferd said. “You’ll get cramps sleeping like that. Why didn’t you come outside and sit with us for lunch?” He shuffled over to his bed and leaned up against the side, tapping the front legs of his walker on the floor.

“The band was pretty good for a bunch of young guys and they had a comedian afterwards,” Ferd said.

“I guess I fell asleep. What time is it?” Willie asked.

“It’s about 4:30. Susie and Dave were just getting ready to take me out to eat, wanna come?” Ferd asked.

“Hi, Susan. Hi, Dave. I saw you out the window earlier. No, I don’t think I will. I’ll just go down to the cafeteria in a few minutes and get something to eat.”

“Okay. You just missed your chance. We’re getting seafood. You know, all the rich meat with that artery-clogging butter all over it. MMMM! You’re gonna miss it!” Ferd said.

“Well, I’m on a cholesterol-free diet now anyway, so I’ll have to catch you next time, but thanks for asking,” Willie said.

Ferd and his family left the room and Willie could hear their voices echo down the empty hallway. He looked out the window. His neck ached. All of the families were gone, and workmen in white uniforms were loading the tables into pickup trucks. The festival was over for another year.

Willie moved the chair back away from the window and sat on his bed. After a pause, he picked up the telephone and dialed.

“Yes, I’d like to make a collect call to Nicholas Turner. The number is two-one-three, eight-six-two, Four-one-five-five.”

After a second, a female voice answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Carol, it’s Willie, how are you?”

“Willie, how nice to hear from you. Did you want to talk to Nick? He’s in the den, but I’ll go get him. Just a second.”

“Hello?”

“Hi, son, it’s me.”

“Oh, Hi Dad, how are you doing?”

“Fine. I just called to see how things were going.”

“Things are going pretty good. We’re getting ready to go to the symphony tonight, in fact, we’d better get going. Can I call you back?”

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"Oh sure, I just wanted to say I'm sorry you missed the spring festival today."

"Was that today? Well, we've been awful busy lately. Carol's had a great influx of clients recently, and I, of course have been real busy with the business. Maybe we'll make it down next year. I've got to go, Dad, or we'll be really late; I'll call you later, okay?" Bye.”

"Bye, Nick."

The humming dial tone replaced the voice on the other end.

Nick had always had that same matter-of-fact voice. He was so rational. That's what makes him so good at his business. He has a good head on his shoulders. He always knows the logical things to do.

"Dad, I know that it seems cruel now, but it's so much better. You can't live in that big house all by yourself now. There's just too much to do and we're afraid that you'll hurt yourself. What if you did get hurt? Carol and I live so far away, nobody would know something was wrong and get you help. We know this nice quiet place, just outside of St. Louis. It's a really nice place, and reasonable, too. There are lots of people your age. You need to meet some new people. You're alone too much.

Let's just go look at it. If you don't like it we'll find someplace you do like. We don't want you to stay in some place you don't like.”

I do like it here, Willie thought. It's not that bad. The people are nice, the nurses are nice and the food is even pretty good. And it is reasonable. I can't really complain.

He walked over and turned the television on and sat down in the green vinyl chair. He flipped through the stations and finally stopped at one with a commercial on it. He turned around to put his slippers on when he heard a splash. He whirled around to face the biggest bass he had ever seen. A blonde man with thick arms pulled the bass into the dip net and threw it into the boat.

Willie stumbled over the chair as he hurriedly shut the television off. He stood for a moment shaking and then finally sat down.
That’s the biggest bass I’ve ever seen. Maybe it’s a county record. It could even be a state record. I can’t wait until Marge sees this one. She’ll throw a fit about having to clean this one. Willie smiled to himself as bright sun glistened off the green bodies of the five fish in the bottom of the boat. He had already caught enough for a mess for them. Maybe he’d send one to Nick and Carol. They might like fresh fish.

I’ll just catch a few more before I go in. If Marge has to get her hands dirty, I might as well make it worth her while.

In his mind’s eye, he could see her standing over the sink, her hands wrist-deep in bloody, scaly water. Every once in a while, her soft hands would bring a white fillet out of the water and set it on a paper towel to dry before putting into the freezer bags and setting it in the icebox.

The first time he’d showed her how to clean fish, she’d gone into the house and thrown up. But, after he’d told her they were already dead and couldn’t feel anything, she began helping him clean. He showed her how to make the first cut just behind the head of the fish and then continued down the spinal cord to the tail. Now they had an agreement, if he’d catch and scale them, she’d clean them.

He baited his hook and threw it back into the water. He thought he heard the motor running, but he ignored it and turned his attention back to his pole. Then, the boat pulled up alongside him and his son stepped into the fishing boat.

“Dad,” he said, putting his hand on his shoulder, “I’ve got something to tell you. It’s about Mom. Carol and I came home a few minutes ago and found Mom on the floor of the bedroom. We didn’t know where you had gone, so we rushed her to the emergency room. She had a heart attack, Dad, she died instantly.”

“Willie. Willie. Snap out of it, for Christ’s sake! You’re the biggest daydreamer I’ve ever known,” Ferd’s harsh voice said. “Are you home already Ferd? Did you have a nice time?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I don’t know how they can afford to take me to such fancy places when they ain’t making nothing on that farm. We have a meeting in a few minutes to discuss what we’re going to do for the family day picnic in July. We’d better get down to the cafeteria so we can get a good seat by the Morrison
twins,” Ferd said.

“Okay, I guess I’ll go. Maybe Nick and Carol can come to the picnic this summer,” Willie said.

The sun shone brightly across the surface of the lake. Wild geese broke away from the trees and flew squawking across the water, their wings almost touching the surface. Willie breathed heavily against the hot humid summer air. Water dripped in a steady rhythm off the raised anchor in the boat in the rhythm of his heart.

The beating stopped.

He looked and saw Marge standing on the shore of the lake. She was waving that white handkerchief she always used to call him in from the lake for lunch. Willie reeled in the bobber and laid it on the bottom of the boat. He gently laid the oars in the water with a splash.

With a smile he began rowing.