

The catfish in my bucket were silent and still. Their black eyes looked empty, their whiskers twitched very slightly, and their fins were stuck to their sides. I was carrying the bucket up a hill to my grandparents cabin, where I knew my grandpa and dad were waiting.

My grandpa is from West Virginia. He knew all about the wilderness, and he was always teaching me about it. He knew the forest we were in like the back of his hand, as he practically lived there. I figure that when he was a kid, he could live off the land for weeks. My dad on the other hand had lived in Virginia when he was a kid. He had spent his summers on the wild Scabby Island with his brother. They had to take a row boat to and from the island, and only their cabin and the wilderness were on it. I didn't have any of this experience. I had lived in Virginia and New York my whole life. My trips to West Virginia had always been short, and besides that I had just been in the city.

“Cale!” My dad yelled down. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah dad,” I yelled back, too tired to say anything else. I took a few more steps with the bucket, hearing the water slosh rhythmically against the sides. A bead of sweat dribbled down my neck, as my shoulders and arms throbbed.

Several minutes before I had been in front of a pond, squeezing a worm onto the hook of my new fishing rod. I had whipped my arm forward, letting the line go. The hook and bobber hit the water, breaking the tranquil green surface. It only took a few minutes before I felt a sharp tug at my wrist. I excitedly reeled in. Soon enough I had seen a blurred dark shape under the surface, and pulled it up. My first fish. I had run up to the cabin, and brought my dad back to proudly show it off to him. While he was down by the pond, I had caught two more catfish.

“Those are really big,” he had told me, patting my back. “Do you want to eat them for dinner tonight?”

“Yeah!” I had enthusiastically exclaimed. I was proud of my catch, and it was my right to have a prize. I thought about how cool it would be to tell my friends that I had caught and ate a catfish. All I would have to do is let my grandpa and my dad prepare it and stick it in the oven.

When I was climbing back up the hill and saw my grandpa's knife for the first time though, I began to realize what I had signed up for.

“C'mon Cale,” my dad said. “We're going to need your help cleaning these. It's pretty hard to do.” He took out a catfish from the bucket and slapped it down on the wooden table he had gotten out of the cabin.

What does that mean again? I asked myself, racking my brain. It seemed like a familiar term, but I just couldn't put my finger on it.

“I think I'll just go inside while you guys cook it or whatever,” I said.

“No Cale, you have to help us clean it,” my dad repeated. I suddenly remembered where I had heard that before. In my copy of *The Dangerous Book for Boys* there was a chapter devoted to hunting and fishing. It had said that you have to clean a rabbit before eating. I realized that they were trying to get me to help them decapitate the fish and pull the guts out of it. I was shocked. I was only nine, and to me that seemed like I should have a free pass from any type of fish cleaning.

“Wait a second,” I said slowly, getting ready to straighten things out. “Couldn’t you guys just cut it up by yourselves? I think I would just mess you up.”

“We need someone to help us hold the fish for us,” my grandpa said. “And I don’t think your mother is going to be too thrilled with that idea.” I realized I wasn’t going to get out of helping them, and a sense of dread came over me. I considered telling them that I had changed my mind, and going back down to the pond to let the fish go, but I decided against it. I didn’t want to look foolish in front of my dad and grandpa. I put my hand on the fishes slippery tail and held on tightly waiting for the struggle. My grandpa lifted the knife up, prepared to bring it down in a deadly strike.

My grandpa chopped at the fishes neck several times before I heard the dull thunk of wood beneath the knife. The fishes bloody head rolled to the side, and to my my horror the jaw started moving up and down, as if it were talking without any sound coming out. It let out a loud croak that sounded a bit like a frog. I remembered the stories about chickens that stayed alive hours after they had their heads cut off. I tried to block that thought from my mind, but I was not very successful.

“Cale, calm down,” my dad said, seeing the look on my face. “It’s not alive anymore those are just nerves.”

“Are you sure?” I questioned, still keeping my distance from the moving head.

“Of course, of course,” my grandpa said. “I used to clean rabbits and fish all the time when I was much younger than you.” I nodded nonchalantly, trying to hide how surprised I was of this. I had been thinking that I was too young to be doing this, but now I was changing my mind.

My dad put the knife to the top of the fishes body. He pressed hard, and made an incision downward.

“Will you help me peel the skin away John?” My dad asked my grandpa. He did, and I saw the intestines and stomach slide out of the opening. I felt myself beginning to become sick so I took a step back.

“Cale, could you be a really big help and take these guts over to the bucket over there?” My grandpa asked.

I took a deep breath and tried to not think about what I was doing. I walked a few yards over to the bucket (a different one than the one I had carried the fish in) and let the guts slide off my hands into it. I walked as slowly as I could back to the table, until it looked like my dad and grandpa were done.

“One down, two to go!” My dad shouted triumphantly.

One down, two to go.

We had managed to produce two fillets of meat from the fish, which I secretly thought was a very small amount from the work we had put in. They were both white and speckled with blood. They reminded me of the cuts of yellowtail and haddock you see in sushi restaurants, only I had just realized what they did to those fish.

“Cale, why don’t you take these inside to your mother and ask her to clean them off,” my grandpa said.

“Sure,” I whispered, not wanting to open my mouth too wide. I laid the fillets out on each hand with care. I was not going to ruin all of the hard work we had put in by dropping them on the dusty ground.

My dad and my grandpa a knowing look. My dad said gently, “You might as well just stay inside. I think me and John have this under control.” He must have just noticed that I was a looking sick. I was grateful in my head though, thanking him silently. I also felt like I might have disappointed him. It was no big deal for my dad and grandpa to clean a fish, so why couldn’t I be a little tougher, too?

Once I walked inside I handed the fish to my mom.

“Dad wants you to wash these,” I told her.

She looked at me, and she seemed concerned. “You look a little sick. Maybe you should go in the bathroom.”

I did, closing the door behind me and looking in the mirror. I was a bit of a mess, drenched in sweat and fish blood. As I looked at myself, I thought about what I had just done. I wanted to feel proud of helping my dad and grandpa, but I just felt kind of sad.

Is it easy for other people the first time they kill something? I thought. I didn’t want to be that type of person, I wanted to be able to step up. I wanted to be able to impress my dad and grandpa, and live up to their expectations.

Maybe I was more grown up than I had been before that morning fishing with my dad and grandpa, but being grown up is harder than anybody realizes.