

Contest Winner: Spring 2015, "Elders"

## **The Fisherman and a .410 Shotgun**

by John Messick

One summer Saturday in sixth grade, my father offered to drive me fifteen miles down the road to go fishing with an old man whose wife had recently passed away.

"John," my father told me, "You'll make Mr. Radevich happy if you do this."

"Sure Dad," I replied, and rushed to our garage for my tackle box.

At twelve, I held the opinion that there was no greater pursuit in life than fishing, and I believed still that the whole point was to catch fish. I was obsessed. While my classmates watched cartoons, I would don my father's waders and slog through icy streams in pursuit of wary trout. On Sundays, I brought a rod to church because we sometimes stopped at a nearby lake on our way home. The rest of the week, I spent hours in our front yard with a plastic plug, perfecting my cast. I memorized the regulations for every lake and stream in a three state radius; I hid *Field and Stream* articles in my school desk. I studied underwater maps with a flashlight under my blankets, well after bedtime.

Whenever the chance to go fishing arose, I took it. It didn't matter to me that Dragisa Radevich was almost seventy years my senior, or that he had an accent so thick it was almost incomprehensible. He was old, which meant to me that he

probably had a lot of fishing experience. Logically, this improved my chances of catching more fish. Back then, I would have hedged almost any bet, suffered any embarrassment, endured any hardship, in order to catch more, and bigger, fish. It never occurred to me that an old fisherman might impart a deeper wisdom as well.

In junior high, I could not imagine a world where angling success might require some deeper understanding. On float trips down the Red Cedar River for smallmouth bass or when we paddled the shoreline of some small lake in the Chequamegon National Forest, it baffled me that my father always had better luck. For Dad, fishing was a flippant endeavor, something to pass the time while he looked for bald eagles and great blue herons along the shore. He insisted that we fish from a canoe, though we had two perfectly good outboards stored in our barn, and it frustrated me to no end that my father's success seemed effortless.

My family knew Mr. Radevich from church. As members of the Russian Orthodox Church, we drove thirty miles one-way each Sunday to attend a country parish founded in 1900 by a handful of immigrants—dairy farmers who could chant Church Slavonic so mournfully that the old people would cry on Good Friday. Mr. Radevich was Serbian, not Russian, and had come to America after World War Two. Our little congregation welcomed him anyway; we counted as members, Greeks, a Romanian monk, and several convert families mixed in with the old Carpatho-Rusyn names. In places where Orthodox churches are few and far between, cultural differences tend to get a little mashed together.

I knew Mr. Radevich as the man who slipped five dollar bills into my hand each week after communion as gratitude for my service as an altar boy. I served behind the altar because I couldn't sing, and because I liked the ritual of wearing altar robes—carefully folding the vestment, presenting it to the priest, bowing for the blessing. Now, more than 20 years later, I sometimes miss those rituals. The effort to transpose them elsewhere—to a successful hunt, to tying flies, to writing—has only occasionally succeeded.

“You are goot boy,” Mr. Radevich always told me, before he went out to the cemetery, in rain or snow, to visit his wife.

My father said Mr. Radevich reminded him of his grandfather, and I think his demand that I spend the day with Mr. Radevich was due in part to this association. Dad saw this fishing trip as a sort of character-building exercise. He treated church the same way—as a thing to endure. In my father's view, God was less a figurehead and more a conception of servitude. I learned very early that it is through servitude—and through stillness— that we find faith.

For an impatient and restless kid, one who prays more to water than to God, the hardest thing in the world is to remain still. I was as restless as they come, and worse, I had a bad obsessive streak. I now know that coaxing a rise to bait involves more than technique, but back then, I hadn't made the leap from religion to fish. My father's demands in the end would lead me to that connection, but it was Mr. Radevich who would show me that the sufferance involved in prayer is worth the resolve it takes to stand fast.

There is a kinship with water that fishermen embrace. Mr. Radevich taught me something else: if I was to become a great fisherman, then I needed first to understand something of my weaknesses. And to understand weakness, I had to know something about tradition, and about God. The connection to fishing is almost too obvious.

Mr. Radevich stood on his porch when we pulled in, and he jogged over to open my car door. His shoulders were still strong; sagging jowls didn't hide the square, high jaw, or temper the reddened nose which turned almost blue when he drank brandy. Two cats crept into the bushes as we stepped out to shake hands.

Later in my life, I would become a reader of fishing stories not for what they would teach me about fishing, but for what they could teach me about the nature of obsession. I would discover that to fish was to experience a form of grace. I would learn to appreciate the beauty of a trout rendered in watercolor as much as I valued the quality of its flesh.

But that Saturday, I sensed only that this old man shared my ache to have a rod and reel in hand. He too, was an addict. Talking to my father, Mr. Radevich had none of the enthusiasm that I heard later when he unlocked the tool shed containing his fishing equipment.

My face lit up at the rows of rods and boxes of tackle. He pulled a few things off the shelves and we went to load the boat.

I was a small twelve years old—maybe 85 pounds, and he had an enormous rowboat, the hull scratched and dented, leaning sideways against the pole shed where he kept his chickens. There was no trailer. My father had left, and it was up to the pair of us—tiny kid and arthritic old man—to load the boat into his battered pickup.

We drove to Bass Lake. There are about four Bass Lakes in the area; the one we chose banned the use of outboard motors. Mr. Radevich liked it for its silence. I liked the weed beds where big bass surfaced to eat dragonflies.

Mr. Radevich insisted on running the trolling motor. We trolled along the shoreline, stopped at promising holes to try our luck. That day, our luck was good. With Mr. Radevich's approval, I tied on a spinner—its hook tufted with chicken feathers—and on the first cast, felt a hard strike. The fish ran deep, turned, broke the surface—a bass. I played it with slow turns of my reel. Mr. Radevich fumbled with the net, and when I brought the fish in close enough, he scooped it up.

“Goot job, Yon,” Mr. Radevich said. His hands shook when he helped remove the hook. I cast again. I snagged a large crappie. The sun beat down on the aluminum seats. It burned a little when I shifted my weight. This was paradise, I thought—like having a professional guide along. There weren't enough fish in the lake to contain my joy.

By the end of the day, we had a full stringer—several panfish, a nice sized bass and the smallest northern pike ever to bite a line. Mr. Radevich had made me keep everything.

“Is okay. We keep to show you Papa,” he said, and sent me home dangling a rope of pathetic bluegills, a little sick from drinking four cans of Pepsi as I waited in his kitchen for my ride. I confirmed what I had begun to suspect out on the water: that Mr. Radevich enjoyed taking me fishing more than he enjoyed fishing itself.

“Look at the fish I caught, Dad,” I said on Mr. Radevich’s front porch. My father was silent; he nodded, looked at me hard. In the car, he raised his eyebrows and asked me, “Don’t you think those are a little under the size limit?”

“But...Mr. Radevich said I had to keep them,” I protested. My father was quiet for a moment, and he couldn’t quite hide his tightlipped grin.

Despite his vigor, my fishing companion suffered not only from chronic arthritis, but annual bouts with malaria. Mr. Radevich had fought in both the African and the European theaters during World War Two. He would make statements that were incongruous with his kindness—complaints about race, religion, game wardens.

Once, he spent a half hour cursing about a neighbor who had taken advantage of him. “This boy, he like to come to shoot foxes. But he drink too much. He drink four, five beer every time, then one day a case of beer. That damn boy—I tell him, ‘you drink my damn beer, you don’t come over no more.’”

It wasn’t Mr. Radevich’s job to give me a well-rounded perspective. He only wanted some company. Still, some of what he said bothered me—especially the

xenophobia. He didn't like Muslims, or Blacks, or Asians, or most members of the clergy. I couldn't help wondering why he shared such opinions with a kid.

In the years since his death I have tried to dissect his stories, to separate the lore from the real history, but what I have discovered has only deepened the mystery of his past. I wanted to see his words as instructional, or at least be able to disseminate meaning from memories that had been skewed by time.

Recently, searching for some way to corroborate my childhood recollections, I wrote to a priest who had visited Mr. Radevich when his wife was still alive. "I enjoyed his goats," the priest replied. "He fed them cigarettes to keep them healthy." Of Mr. Radevich's war years, he knew little.

On the lake, I learned that Mr. Radevich had played professional soccer in Europe and South America. He had attended a military academy in Yugoslavia. When he mentioned his wife, his eyes filled with tears. He visited her grave nearly every day—a forty mile round trip to the cemetery.

"Your family—it is good they go to church. It is important," he would say.

Mostly, I remember his stories about fishing: the day he filled the bottom of the boat with panfish or the twenty-pound pike he once caught below the Chetek Lake Dam.

"Fifteen people, they watch while I fight dees fish. Two hour it take me to bring to shore. But the meat is no good. I feed it to the cats."

Like all good fisherman, he exaggerated. Writer Nick Lyons says that in great fish stories "big fish are caught or lost; people say wild and spontaneous words; event becomes memory and sometimes, in the hands of a master, bleeds into

art." The fish Mr. Radevich had caught were huge, impossible maybe. He always presented these fish—crappies as big as dinner plates, record bass, vicious muskies—in an offhand manner, the same way he presented his past. And when we fished together, he rarely dropped a line in the water.

Still, if the memories of our youth allow us to form the narrative that guides our philosophical present, then from this old Serbian, I learned the power of stories.

And I learned too, the importance of faith. Faith, I realized, isn't a moment of Zen understanding, but a slow and tedious practice. Through faith comes grace and through grace comes understanding: we never fish the same water twice, but the past can repeat. The sadness of youth will be revisited in old age.

Mr. Radevich had just one daughter, who lived in Omaha. Except for the priest who only came once every few months, I was often his only company.

He succumbed to the isolation of his farmhouse. He gave up fending off the foxes and coyotes and let his chickens die. His garden filled with weeds. His house smelled strongly of cat food, and Meals on Wheels delivered his dinner on Styrofoam trays. Cataracts clouded his eyes; it became harder to visit his wife's grave.

Our lives were like opposing mirrors. I joined track and dreamt about the girls' volleyball team. My obsession with fish quieted. I neglected our friendship.

One Sunday at church, when he was still able to drive and I was just headed into high school, I asked Mr. Radevich when we could next go fishing. He



complained about his arthritis, but mentioned a slough not far from his house. I felt that sudden flush of unrealized potential, the kind that starts in the stomach and leaves your throat aching. The lake's obscurity, I thought, assured a trophy catch.

"Only...Very difficult to get in. My boat is no goot. Only canoe will work," he said.

"We can take my dad's," I said. He patted my arm and agreed.

A week later, my father helped tie the fiberglass Old Town canoe to the top of our station wagon, and at Mr. Radevich's house, I unloaded the boat without any help.

The creek access to Moose Ear Lake wound through a maze of stagnant swamp. It didn't bother Mr. Radevich that he needed help getting into the canoe, or that we got lost multiple times, tangled in weeds and unable to pivot. He was just happy to be out.

The sun burned hot overhead. A light breeze scraped at the tall grass. Milfoil swayed in the green August water. It was terrible fishing weather.

Once we had navigated the marsh grass, we paddled quietly, feeling less cramped on the open water. I cast occasionally toward promising holes. For a long while we didn't speak. The fish weren't biting, and my thoughts wandered.

"Tell me about the war," I said. He didn't reply, and I worried I had offended him.

“War, is no goot,” he spoke finally. “You are goot boy, and is goot you never know war...” his voice trailed off. I watched the funnels made by my paddle strokes trail off into the dark water.

After a while, he began again. “I tell you. I was goot soldier. If I was young man again, I go....I fight these Moslem, these people are no goot,” he said.

Mr. Radevich, even though he had not been back to Serbia in fifty years, was speaking of Slobodan Milosevic’s atrocities against ethnic Albanians and Muslims, stories of which appeared in the daily news. It must have been willful ignorance that allowed me to forget his prejudice.

Even now, I remain forgiving of his bigotry. My memories of Mr. Radevich are shrouded in a certain obtuseness, like when fishermen return with full stringers and say it was a good day, but block out the slime and stink of so many dead fish.

When Mr. Radevich next spoke, he did not mention current events. He spoke instead of his war, the World War. He spoke of the horror, of courage, of the friends who had died next to him.

As gunner in a fighter plane, he had been shot down during a battle over Italy. Though he survived the crash landing, Mr. Radevich was wounded. The only doctor they could find in the field hospital was a German prisoner-of-war. Someone held a gun to the doctor’s head, and promised that if Mr. Radevich didn’t survive, neither would the doctor.

“I still have bullet, here,” Mr. Radevich said to me, pointing at his chest. “Next to my heart, for fifty year now.”

Behind watering eyes, shaking hands, and the pained look on his face, I tried to imagine the young soldier going off to battle. My childish notions of war and bloodshed dissolved, and I was left scared of the horrors that had defined the life of my old friend.

We didn't catch a single fish that day. After a while, even I broke the golden rule of fishermen—keep the line in the water—and stopped casting. As Mr. Radevich spoke, I discovered that fishing involves more than the thrill of a trophy catch. To be a fisherman is to know solitude, to respect peace, and sometimes, to learn what it has means for a man to have lived.

The fall after I turned fourteen, I passed a hunter's safety course, and with that, my sporting obsession came to include hunting. Mr. Radevich was the perfect man to stir this enthusiasm. While I casted for bass, he talked about shooting ruffed grouse, fox and deer out of his backyard.

“One day, I see three buck in dee field. One have ten point, one eight, and one have maybe twelve. Every night, they fight in the field. I shoot dee big one.”

A full day in the boat had gotten to be a strain for Mr. Radevich's health. We headed back to the truck early in the afternoon.

“We get back my home, Yon, you can shoot .22. I have priest from church, he love to come over, shoot gun with me. Now his family live in Cleveland. Every year, they send Christmas card. Nobody now to shoot with, so we try.”

Back at his farmstead, he retrieved a rifle from his bedroom and showed me how to work the action. We set up a paper plate on a maple tree, and I spent half

an hour shooting holes into the paper. Mr. Radevich smiled, satisfied. Back inside, he offered me something to drink.

“You want something? Pepsi?”

I cringed. Every time we went fishing, I came home sick from sugar, and besides, I hated Pepsi. He frowned at my pained look.

“You want beer?”

“Okay,” I said, and I drank my first Leinenkugel’s while he fed his two cats. We started talking again about hunting. Reaching into his kitchen closet, Mr. Radevich pulled out the .410 break action shotgun, his grouse gun. He passed me the weapon.

“Is it loaded?” I asked.

“No...no...is okay,” he assured me.

I lifted the gun to my shoulder and pointed it toward the door. I cocked the weapon and took pleasure in the click of the hammer. Then I couldn’t figure out how to release the action.

“Here, I show you,” said Mr. Radevich. The cats slunk away along the flower pattern wallpaper into the bedroom. “Uncock it, like thees,” he said, and pulled the trigger.

My ears exploded as the shotgun blasted in the confined kitchen. I stared, mouth agape, at the shattered window. Shards clung like teeth to the pane, then crashed into the flowerbed outside. For more than ten seconds, the room rang with eerie silence. Mr. Radevich looked dumbfounded.

“Oh no...oh...no, no, no....Yon!” he dropped the shotgun and gripped my shoulders so tight that I squirmed.

“You are okay? ....is okay....no, no, no.” He slumped down into a kitchen chair, and both of us looked at the jagged shards, all that remained of the window he had just blown away.

Slowly, our fright and confusion gave way to a guilty amusement. We went outside to look at the glass that had rained on his flower bed. After a few minutes, Mr. Radevich said, “You want Pepsi?” and everything was all right.

It was years before my parents heard what had happened to the window that day. After he died, I discovered Mr. Radevich hadn't even told his daughter. “He told me somebody tried to rob him!” she said.

That was, I think, among our last trips. His health continued to decline; old demons caught up to him. Instead of fishing, when I visited, we just sat at his kitchen table and talked.

When he went into the nursing home, I didn't go to see him. I had started college and never seemed to find time when I was home for holidays. I knew he would have appreciated a visit, but I convinced myself that part of him would have been ashamed.

In my mind, I wanted to keep him as my fishing partner. So I pretended he hadn't gotten old and that I wouldn't be missed. Perhaps too, I wanted to hold on to my own memories of childhood.

The writer and fisherman Thomas McGuane believes our reasons for fishing have Biblical connections. “The Bible tells us to watch and listen,” he writes, “Something like this suggests what fishing ought to be about: using the ceremony of our sport and passion to arouse greater reverberations within ourselves.”

The Book of Job mentions fishhooks. In Genesis, water came first. Izaak Walton, who in 1653 wrote the first guidebook on the pursuit of fish, claimed that fishing is the perfect merger of science and God. As for me, I have found no better place to observe nature or to contemplate existence than from the bank of a river or on a lake at sunrise. There is an old cliché that says: better to think of God on the boat than to think of fish while in church. A decent sentiment, but I think Mr. Radevich would disagree. Better to think of God always, he might say—fishing is just a nice metaphor.

On all of our trips, I never caught any fish big enough to tell stories about. The trophies I caught and the monsters that got away—times when the line broke or the reel malfunctioned or the trout slipped from my hands as I tried to bring it into the canoe—came at other times, fishing with my dad. Perhaps Mr. Radevich was not such a good fisherman. More likely though, I learned from him not how to be a good fisherman, but rather, how to be attentive to myself.

Mr. Radevich died around the time I graduated from college. At his funeral, I was asked by his daughter to be a pallbearer. I stood in the back of the church in the same pew Mr. Radevich had stood in for years, and watched the altar boys

concentrate on the dripping wax of their candles. I had done the same once; I knew how hard it was to stand so solemnly for so long.

We carried his casket out to the graveside, to the freshly dug hole next to his wife. And as we laid roses or sprinkled a handful of dirt or said a parting prayer, I watched my father slip a five dollar bill to one of the altar boys. I understood then what Drago Radevich had taught me: that we are expected, from generation to generation, to carry on the old traditions, in order that they be rendered anew.

After the funeral luncheon, I walked back out to the cemetery, where his casket had already been lowered into the ground. As I crossed myself, I noticed that next to his name on the tombstone was inscribed a soccer ball and the Christian symbol of a fish. I drew a fishing lure from my pocket and left it on the fresh-dug dirt.



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