Going for the Big Ones

Fishing is a test of manhood to an eleven-year-old boy. It is an activity as old as mankind, formerly used as a means of survival but now made into an all-American pastime. Somehow, I think there is a Neolithic pride in the knowledge that one has outsmarted a fish. When you stare at one moving about your line, you can't help but think, "I'm not dumb enough to get caught on a hook." This element of fishing proves one's wit, the measure of a man. Still, there is more to fishing. Plainly, it relaxes oneself and can remove the mind from everyday stress. As Thoreau went to Walden, men, not being able to find Nature easily on land, go to the sea where civilization is nonexistent for miles.

I came upon an opportunity to fish when on summer vacation with my family in Destin, Florida. The chartered fishing boat set off at 5:30 in the morning with the rise of the sun, an hour I usually spent in bed. Having waved good-bye to my mom and sister at the dock in the grayness of the early day, my dad and I began our voyage. The green waters of the Emerald Coast splashed up into my eye as I peered over the edge of the boat staring at jellyfish. I had counted nearly one hundred of the stinging blobs in the few moments since we had left shore. The newly acquired irritation in my right eye had hindered the count. To my side rushed a seaman in his mid-twenties who one could tell had been on the ocean all his life. He moved about the boat quickly and with ease unlike the other passengers. His hands were rough and had many scars. A cud of tobacco was stored in his left cheek resulting in a brown-red squirt upon the ship deck every so often. He wore an old beat-up cap with a full crease in the bill. His shirt that read "I'd rather be fishing" had deep stains of yellow and brown guts in patches everywhere one could imagine a fish or its guts could possible be. "What's your trouble, champ?" he inquired having seen the water splash in my face.

"I'm all right," I snapped back quickly not wanting him to think I was a spoiled kid who needed help doing everything from baiting a hook to reeling in a fish. I wanted to fish
all by myself to prove I was a strong, brave fisherman. My dad glanced over at me and then went back to staring at the sea. I constantly asked him where he was staring.

"Nowhere," he always would mumble. I think he was just contemplating ideas and problems of his world without work, an infrequent experience for him. That's what I'd do at least.

The journey carried on as it had before. The eight passengers would move about the boat from the deck to the cabin as the captain steered the boat to the spots of fish showing up on his radar and the "mate" (the name I temporarily gave him) prepared the fishing gear. The radar is blatant cheating. Fishing lingers in my mind as the natural way in which our predecessors survived. Yet, we use technology that removes its natural element to ensure our $200 payment's worth. Anyway, the eight passengers of the boat, grouped into four separate families, provoked some interest. My dad and I from Nashville were present at this time next to the captain watching the pink dots on the fish radar. We were wearing our oldest, grungiest clothes, as advised by my mom, but still looked rather clean-cut. The next group consisted of a man, his wife, and his son who was also eleven. They reminded me of my own family except they came from Chicago. The mother and father, living out their middle-aged years, looked to be well-mannered, nice people. I wondered why they had come from so far away to Destin, an unworthy place for such a trip. A boy and his dad from Montgomery made up the third group. The boy, around five, and his father, around thirty, were always laughing, smiling, and playing childish games but it all seemed to be an act. They were nearly too happy. The final group had a single man from Nashville as well. He looked lonely and hardly ever spoke. His beard hung down to his belly button with a few hints of gray. He claimed to be a businessman on vacation with his girlfriend who was shopping.

At this moment the "mate," who later told us to call him Jack, walked out of the cabin with four medium-sized fishing rods and a variety of colorful plastic baits above their hooks. Each rod had two hooks for what was termed "trolling." Four members of
the party were soon standing at the back of the boat allowing their hook to skim at the top of the rippy, shiny water. In two minutes all four of these people, including the father, mother, and son trio and the solo man, had caught six-inch fish that were taken off the hook by Jack. Next, my dad and I seized rods and began to troll. Next to us stood the father and his small son who had one hand on the rod while Jack fished. Finally, I was actually fishing. The wind blew at my back as the still rising sun's glare on the water nearly blinded me. But, the boat had a gentle rock that made me feel more comfortable. Jack showed me how to work the rod quickly while I stared at the jet of water coming out from behind the boat. It's size indicated the immensity of the boat's engine. When given the green light, I sent the thin, clear line into the wavy water. In a short while all three, actually four, of my fishing companions' lines had shiny squiggly fish fighting with all their might to shake free. I began to complain that I wasn't very lucky. My dad, instead of comforting me, commented when I asked, that I was just a bad fisherman. But, a few minutes later, a large yank nearly removed my rod from my hand. I began to reel in the fish but I was struggling and my dad could see a layer of perspiration forming on my forehead. He cracked a smile as I pressed the rod harder into the plastic circle attached to my left hip by a blue, cheaply made belt. He said that I was weak if I was unable to get in a six inch little "minnow." After a minute or so none of teeth clenching gridlock, the fish was in my sight. Squinting harder though, I saw two fish, one on each of my hooks. I gave my dad a smile from ear to ear and swung the fish into the boat.

Jack shouted at me, "Nice goin' kid. Two ain't too bad. Once caught three myself though." Using some type of hook he moved the fish from my line and dropped them into a garbage can. "Nice bait for later. The big'uns 'll be bitin' for these suckas," Jack thoughtfully pointed out to me. Immediately, I stared at the fish and felt sorry they'd only be food for a bigger fish and not a trophy representing my triumph. Soon, remembering my dad's criticism, I walked over to him and looked straight into his eyes.
"Too weak! Bad fisherman! Didn't see you catch two," I bragged. He shook his head smirking and patted me on the shoulder. Together, we stared again out into the watery expanse as we awaited a permanent fishing spot. All of a sudden, a 1500 pound marlin jumped out of the water and splashed back into the calm sea. In front of the sun, it looked like a whale. In a period of two or three seconds, one of the world's most powerful beings had presented himself. From 100 feet, I could feel his power. I just looked on in awe with my jaw open. All I could think was, "I'm gonna catch a fish that big."

"You're dreamin'," my dad whispered to me knowing my thoughts.

"Just wait and see," I retorted. I began to look over our boat. It was all white and shiny. What caught my eye was seven or eight long, bright silver poles with rope on them on the captain's upper level. I wondered for what they were used. They hung out at a forty-five degree angle from the ship out to the sky, a seemingly useless position. After dreaming up possible uses of the poles ranging from lightning rods to places to hide drugs, I again joined my dad in a transcendentalistic contemplation of my natural surroundings. Each wave and each cloud drifted without visible bounds in a constant motion creating a dizzying scene. The sun sent a brutal heat upon the tip of my nose reddening it more and more as each minute passed. I became at one with nature as I felt myself swimming in the cool green waters and flying like a bird through the breezy yet tepid late summer's air.

"All righty," Jack commented, "Let's go at the big guys. That's enough kiddy play." To my surprise, Jack took six rods five times the size of the rods used only seconds earlier and, after baiting them and casting them into the sea, attached them to the mysterious six silver poles. Thirty minutes characterized by conversation between my dad and me about baseball, another of America's pastimes, passed by quickly. The bending of one of the rods into an upside down "U" caught our attention and silenced us. "Move," Jack dynamically exclaimed. His pale blue eyes matching the ocean became as wide as the eye of a tornado. Sprinting to the very taut rod, he removed it from its place on a silver
pole and ran it over into my hands. Breathless with excitement, I began to reel in a large
object with every ounce of muscle in my body. Veins bulged from my arm and blood
rushed to my face which simultaneously became rubicund of visage. In five minutes of
effort I turned the handle once. Jack stood by me, insuring that I stayed in the boat.
Without warning, a marlin twice the size of the one seen earlier on our voyage leaped
from his watery hiding place. He spat out of his mouth a small silver object. In awe, I
nearly dropped my rod. Gaining consciousness, I continued my struggle which had-

instantly been made easy. The fish was forever lost. [Without a prize for our efforts, the
time came to return to the rocky shore and with it our nearly forgotten civilization. I
sulked in the cabin while taking last glimpses of the picture-perfect picture of blue sky on
blue sea. Sunburnt and in despair, I walked onto solid ground.

Looking back, I realize the inane nature of my stubborn dolor. From the time I
first looked out into the Gulf of Mexico, I had in fact been victorious in my test of
manhood because I experienced the essence of fishing. Fishing concerns contemplation
and admiration of nature along with peaceful carelessness-- not catching fish. Men would
fish for years without catching a scrap. Santiago, in The Old Man and the Sea,
exemplifies this type of determined fisherman. One might say life is a fishing trip;
sometimes the big ones get away. Thoreau might say fisherman fish so they can live the
most simple, natural way of life and say that they actually lived. I say that life itself is like
a fishing trip; sometimes you get'em, sometimes you don't, but always present is the
beauty of the journey.