Every few years, I embark on a grand tradition: going fishing with my grandparents in northern Wisconsin. My grandparents have traveled "up north" every year since the time when my mother was a girl growing up near Milwaukee. My grandfather enjoys fishing peacefully on the vast system of lakes and my grandmother passes the time shopping in the small town nearby. Last year was finally my turn to go alone with them to the rented cottage by the lake. I helped load up all the fishing equipment, bicycles, and life jackets, and delicately lifted the tattered box containing the game of Royal Rummy onto the back seat. Together, my grandfather and I hitched his new fishing boat to the back of the car.

We left early in the morning, and I rode with my grandfather in his gray Honda. He said it has been a good car, but I recalled a slight problem a few years ago. The Honda broke down, and the employee at the small mechanic's shop was afraid to touch a foreign car. Somehow everything worked out, but I could still see myself standing around in that hot gas station, with my grandmother teaching me how to blow a bubble as I read the Bazooka Joe comics. My grandfather listened to country music on the way up to Minaqua and was one of the very few people I knew who religiously watched the Grand Old Opry every Saturday night on TNN. I thought the music reminded him of a time when he used to listen to Patsy Cline on the radio with his friends. Sleeping in the car, I woke up in time to have breakfast at Paul Bunyan's Lumberjack restaurant, a ritual in northern Wisconsin. We stopped in and had the hearty family meal, with pancakes, apple sauce, and cold milk.

"Wanna mint?" my grandfather asked, removing the blue roll of Lifesavers from his pocket. I accepted, in the eager way I have when it comes to candy.

"One time your mom got mad at me for letting you have so many mints that it gave you
the shits" he said grinning.

My grandmother shot a cold glance at him for his choice of language, but my grandfather just winked at her.

We passed the bait shop and small grocery store and turned onto a gravel road which eventually became the muddy, pine-needle covered drive that I remembered so well from previous visits. Many times had my street bicycle, its thin tires not made for off-road, slipped in the mud.

Our yellow wood cottage was by no means solitary, for it was within thirty yards of the five other cabins owned by Harold, a long-time acquaintance of my grandparents. The cottage had two bedrooms, a bath, and a kitchen/living room with a refrigerator, stove, couch, and table. This was definitely not "roughing it" compared to some of the places I had slept in through my experiences in the Boy Scouts, but there was no television set.

It would be unusual having my own bedroom this time, for either my brother or my sister usually came along. The boat ramp was not far away, and I took off my shoes and stepped into the dark mud to help my grandfather slowly lower his craft into the green waters of the lake. Then we both hopped in and maneuvered the fishing boat around to the dock. After we got settled in the cabin, I enjoyed an old Wisconsin favorite: bratwursts grilled by my grandfather and smothered with sauerkraut and spicy mustard. After this satisfying meal, the three of us kept the tradition alive by divvying up the pennies we had brought from the bank and playing Royal Rummy until the sun went down.

My grandfather roused me at five-thirty the next morning, and after getting dressed, we ate a small breakfast of muffins from the nearby bakery. I picked up two fishing poles and my grandfather's six-tray tackle box containing all the brightly-colored lures and walked out to the mist covered lake. Apparently, we were the only ones awake at this early hour, for we wanted to
get out before what my grandfather called "those blasted water-skiers" stirred up the lake. He started the motor, and I sat in front as the boat glided over the dark, glassy water. Our cottage, with my grandmother still fast asleep, disappeared as we entered the canal between lakes.

Today we were fishing on Rice Lake, where my grandfather caught the only muskier that I remember. Although he has hardly caught any of the huge game fish his whole life, he enjoys fishing and is still trying to find the secret to catching "the big one." On that particular summer morning, I, at the age of nine, awoke to the sound of a commotion outside. My grandfather had just returned with a thirty-six inch muskier, small compared to the monsters I had seen in the bait shop, but large enough to boost his pride. He had vowed that year that he would not return to the cottage again in the summer if he did not catch a big fish; he has been coming back ever since.

My grandfather let me have some of the small fish teeth to take home.

Finally we came out onto the lake. My grandfather's system was to put live bait, such as a night crawler, minnow, or leech out in the water, and keeping his eye on the bobber, cast with a different pole. Not liking the slimy creature tickling my palm as a child, I had been afraid of worms when my grandfather demonstrated how to wrap the night crawler around the hook to make an appetizing lure for a fish. I accomplished this task now and cast the line out over the smooth water. Rice Lake was congested with weeds, making it an ideal habitat for fish, but a pain for us, who had to use "waddles" lures and watch out for the hooks getting permanently caught. I asked my grandfather which bait would be good to put on my spinning rod, but he said that today would be different; today I would fish for muskier. I had trouble learning to use the bait-casting reel, but after a few tries and annoying my grandfather by entangling the line, I finally got the hang of casting with two hands and could feel the line spinning and refreshing my thumb with a small spray of water as the heavy lure rolled out smoothly.
We fished through the morning, our most exciting moment occurring when what looked like a small muskier jumped at my bait and swam away just as I was pulling the line out of the water. It must have caused a commotion under the surface, for all the fish stayed hidden in the depths of the lake. When the sun was high over our heads, we took a break from casting and from the cooler my grandfather produced the sandwiches and diet soda that his wife had packed. Tennessee-grown, I hardly ever heard anyone say the word "soda pop" and not be looked upon as a little out of place, for everyone that I knew in Nashville called all carbonated drinks "cokes" regardless of the brand. Perhaps I was not a true "southern boy," for both of my parents were from the Midwest, where I now savored a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Everything always seems to taste better out in the fresh air.

Suddenly, I saw my bobber go under the water. I did not expect anything, for I had periodically reeled in the line to discover a heap of weeds around the hook or find the worm completely nibbled off. This time, however, it was no mere weed, but a fish, and what a trophy it was. The tiny bluegill must have been four inches at the most. Both my grandfather and I joked about the fish, secretly thankful that if all else failed we did at least catch something. Spurred by the knowledge that there were fish in this lake, we continued casting. We tried to move to a different spot on the water, but the boat would not budge until I realized that the anchor was still down.

"That reminds me of the time I took your grandmother out in a rowboat - it was when we first started dating," my grandfather, inspired by my mistake, began. "She was rowing, and I had accidentally forgotten to lift the anchor. She was in tears as she rowed the boat all the way across the lake. It's amazing she stuck around after that."

It was now about three o'clock in the afternoon, and my grandfather asked if I wanted to
head back. Reluctant to leave without any fish, I finally conceded and he started the motor. The wind had started to pick up speed, and white-caps were forming on the water. We pulled the boat up just in time, for the clouds were beginning to darken, and I used one of my fancy Boy Scout knots to fasten it to the dock. "That's a nice knot," my grandfather said, "but a simple square knot would work just as well." I noted this information for the future; maybe simplicity is better. We gathered up the tackle and put it back on the porch by the cottage. My grandmother greeted us at the door. "How was fishing?" she asked.

"We caught one measly little bluegill," said I.

"Maybe tomorrow you'll fare better," she said optimistically.

"I doubt it," my grandfather declared. "This rain is just enough to confuse the fish into not knowing when to eat, and screw up fishing for tomorrow."

The next day, the rain forced the three of us to go shopping, and that evening we went to a water-ski show. Little could we have known that the tiny bluegill I'd caught on the first day was to be the only fish caught that entire week. In a strange way, however, I felt fulfilled as we packed to leave, even if all we had seemed to do was sit in a boat and enjoy the peace and simple beauty of the lakes. All of us were looking forward to coming again to the yellow cottage "up north."