

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

T. Stephen Phillips
Cincinnati Literary Club
January 28, 2019

It was near the end of summer 1962 when Lucy, my college girlfriend, called me.

“How’d you like to come up here for a couple of days fishing,” she asked. “My parents suggested that I invite you.”

“Up here” meant northern Wisconsin where her family vacationed each summer. Lucy had told me about her experiences as a camper on Trout Lake and about Forest Lodge on nearby High Lake where her family stayed.

“It would be a day and a half drive for you,” she said. “Madison is over half way, and you could stay overnight there, in the Holiday Inn where we usually stay. No need to bring fishing equipment.”

My summer job was ending, and our senior year in college wouldn’t start for three weeks. I accepted Lucy’s invitation and looked forward to meeting and impressing her parents.

I had bragged to Lucy about my fishing skills, proved by photos of catches of bluegill, largemouth bass, and catfish. My father loved fishing, and together we had fished creeks, farm ponds, small lakes, and the Ohio river. Cane pole fishing with earthworms cultivated in the back yard.

I had watched my father, in straw hat with a cigarette hanging loosely from his lips, working the cane pole line in and around cattails and water lilies, knowing just where a school of bluegill had gathered. And, I had become as good a cane pole fisherman as he.

*** * ***

Forest Lodge was impressive - a log-built main lodge and a dozen cabins which sat above the lake amid pine and birch trees.

Lucy's Dad, whom everyone called "Dr. K", was 70, a physician who married and had children later in life. He was a tall man with bushy white hair and a hearty laugh. He had suffered a back injury in the War, and had found that the best therapy for his persistent back problem was pulling on the oars of a rowboat during the summer.

I arrived mid-afternoon, and after greetings and introductions, I was shown to a cabin in which Lucy's brother Charles was also staying. Charles was a third-year medical student. I'd need to impress him as well as Lucy's parents.

Around the dinner table that evening, Dr. K announced my fishing schedule. I would fish with Lucy the first day, "a light day of fishing to get the kinks out," he said. And, the second day would be serious fishing with Charles.

*** * ***

Following breakfast the next morning, Lucy and I met Tom Newcomb, our fishing guide who lived on nearby Rice Lake. He had guided for 30 years, and his specialty was walleye. We fished High Lake from Dr. K's wooden fishing boat. It was a new experience, and it took me a while to become familiar with the open-face spinning reels and lightweight rods, equipment much different from the cane poles to which I was accustomed.

We fished with large active minnows, moved along the bottom of the lake with slight twitches of the rod. I had difficulty differentiating a tug on the line caused by the minnow's own struggling action and a pull caused by a walleye strike. I marveled at Tom's ability to maneuver the

boat with one oar while tending his own fishing line, and I was embarrassed as Lucy and Tom caught fish while I unsuccessfully tried to replicate their techniques.

By noon there were several walleye on the stringer, and we went ashore an island where Tom expertly fileted three of the fish and, over an open fire, produced a memorable meal of walleye, fried potatoes with onion, and baked beans.

Back on the water, Tom said, "let's try musky fishing." Dr. K had asked Tom to give me a beginner's instruction for my next day's fishing. Tom reached for the two musky poles he had brought along - sturdy 6 ½ foot rods to which were attached Pflueger casting reels with braided 30-pound test line. A 10-inch wire leader was used to connect the fishing line and lure. "Without the leader, the musky would bite right through the fishing line," Tom said, as he pulled from his tackle box and attached a lure.

He handed a rod to Lucy who began casting immediately. She knew what she was doing. I looked apprehensive. "You'll get the hang of it," Tom said encouragingly. And, before handing the other rod to me, he demonstrated the motion of tipping the rod back over his shoulder, left hand holding the butt of the rod and right hand on the reel with his thumb placed lightly on the spool of braided line. "Just whip it forward," he said, as I watched his expert cast send the lure flying through the air some thirty yards. He began a quick retrieve. "Just stay alert," he said. "If a fish strikes, set the hook," and he demonstrated with a quick jerk up of the rod. "But whatever happens, keep your thumb on the reel line," he said, "when a fish takes a run, if you don't apply thumb pressure to retard the release of line from the reel, the line will run off too fast and you'll get a backlash or a birds' nest in the line. That's usually the end of the fish."

I got the idea, and after several dozen casts, and experimenting with an imaginary strike, I thought I could handle the outfit. We cast lures through the afternoon, but no musky strikes. Nonetheless, we could tell Dr. K at dinner about the good walleye fishing that morning.

* * *

The weather turned bad overnight, and we awoke to a cold, dark day, with light rain and brisk wind. At breakfast, Dr. K. said that, weather permitting, Charles and I would fish with Kenny Shore, a hard-core no-nonsense guide who fished only for big muskies.

“Hey Doc,” Kenny said as he approached us outside the lodge, “It’s still working,” and with a laugh he bent up and down the scarred thumb on his right hand.

Kenny was sixty, lean and wiry, with light blue eyes and dark, weathered skin. He wore brown canvas pants and shirt and a gray colored safari helmet.

Dr. K looked out over the lake. “Wind’s pretty high, Kenny, what do you think?”

“If it doesn’t get much worse, we can handle it,” Kenny replied. “I’ll have to work my tail off, but could be a big fish day. They’ll be looking to attack.”

“Thought I’d take them up to Palmer and Tenderfoot,” he continued. “I’ve seen a monster up there this summer. Bigger than Swanson’s.”

I learned later that Kenny had a large musky mount hanging on the wall at Guides Inn, the bar hangout for guides and other locals. Rank among guides related directly to the size of their fish hanging on the walls. Kenny’s fish was 46-inches in length -- but second to Tom Swanson’s 48-inch whopper.

“Can you fish?”, he asked me pointedly. Hesitantly, I nodded my head. “O.K. boys, let’s get going. Bring your rain gear.” Dr. K had a warm jacket and full length hooded rain parka for me, along with a safari helmet.

On the ride to the fishing water in Kenny’s truck, he regaled us with musky stories and his quest to catch a fish bigger than Swanson’s.

“King of the fresh water fish,” he said. “No other fish is even close. And mean. Will attack anything getting in the water – ducks and other birds, squirrels, frogs, you name it. Not for food; but just to kill.”

He held up his scarred thumb. “Doc done that to me,” he said. A year earlier he had come to Dr. K’s cabin with a large fishhook buried deep in his thumb courtesy, of a customer’s errant cast. “It was a sorry sight,” he said, “I couldn’t get the hook out because of the barb. Doc gave me a glass of whiskey, and he took that hook and pushed it further in my thumb and then twisted it out at another point where he could clip the barb. Thought I’d die it hurt so bad. But, he done it. And didn’t charge me a penny.” I shivered at the thought of a big hook being pushed through Kenny’s flesh.

The wind hadn’t let up when Kenny backed the boat down the landing ramp on Lake Palmer, and we looked out at the whitecaps. There were no other cars at the landing. “We’ve got her to ourselves, boys,” Kenny said. “If we can stay on the water, we may get a chance at a fish.” He finished moving equipment to the boat, and we put on our rain gear. “You’re in the bow,” he said to me. “Charles, you handle the motor.” Kenny sat between us in the rowing seat of his 16’ wooden boat.

“Head for the weeds, Charles, “ Kenny said as he pointed to a distant patch of green sticking up near center of the Lake. It was cold and there was a light drizzle. I saw two people in a canoe near the

shoreline. "Indians," shouted Kenny above the motor roar, "gathering wild rice." I watched as the canoe slipped through the stand of rice, the Indians bending the plants over the gunwale and striking the plant heads with sticks to release the grain into the bottom of the canoe.

When we got to the weed bed, Kenny handed a rod to Charles and attached a lure from his tackle box, "Let's try a Cisco, Charles," he said, and pointed toward the weed bed.

"For you, we're going with my black bucktail," Kenny said to me, and he pulled from his box a scrawny-looking lure about six inches long, with two large treble hooks covered by a few strands of black deer hair. "My favorite fish catcher," he said as he waved it toward me. "Caught more fish with this bucktail than any other lure ever." He handed me the rod and pointed toward the weeds.

Kenny fought the wind and waves as he worked to position the boat for our casting. "Just short of the weeds, boys" he said, "and keep your casts low, don't get the lures up in the wind. Short and low, boys, short and low."

We cast and cast, round and round the weed bed, Kenny laboring at the oars. "They're in there, boys, dig 'em out," he said.

After nearly 2 hours of casting, I felt the boat jerk and looked over my shoulder to see that Charles had pulled his rod into the air. "Set her again," Kenny shouted, and Charles gave another jerk on the rod. "You've got him," said Kenny, "Reel in, Steve." Kenny worked to keep the boat positioned so that the fish was broadside. "Tip up, Charles" Kenny admonished. After just a minute, however, the fight appeared to leave the fish, and Kenny yelled. "God Damnit, a snake."

Puzzled, I watched as Charles brought alongside the boat a fish, not a snake, and the biggest fish I'd ever seen on a line -- maybe 30 inches, I

guessed. Kenny reached over the boat and grabbed the fish by the back of its head, removed the hook with pliers, smacked the fish over the head with the pliers, and threw it back in the lake. "Damn snakes," he said. I learned that northern pike, although of the same family as muskies, were hated by true musky fishermen. They were cowardly fish, not worthy opponents, and they ate the musky young.

"Start her up, Charles," Kenny said, "and head for Tenderfoot." He pointed toward the northwestern part of the lake. Palmer and Tenderfoot lakes are attached by the mile-long Ontonagon River channel. On the way up the river, Kenny took from a knapsack and gave us sandwiches prepared at the Lodge. No time for shore lunch today. Kenny was on a mission.

The river ride was scenic, twists and turns, interesting birds, a beaver dam, a moose standing knee deep in water. And then we turned out of the river channel into Tenderfoot.

"Let's fish the shoreline out to the rock formation," Kenny said to Charles. Charles cut the motor, and Kenny rowed the boat parallel with the shoreline. For nearly an hour, Charles and I threw lures. One fish was sighted by Kenny following Charles's lure. "Maybe legal," said Kenny, but he didn't get excited about it.

And, then Kenny told Charles to head out for the rocks, and a short ride took us to an area of the lake that looked completely barren. "Rock bar underneath," Kenny said. "This is where I saw the big fish."

The wind was higher now, and it was harder for Kenny to control the boat. He weaved around and over the rock bar. Casting became robot like. Cast out, reel in; cast out, reel in.

And, then I heard Kenny shout, "There he is!!" I just got a glimpse of the fish as it sank out of sight behind Charles's lure near the boat.

“That’s the one,” Kenny said, “figure 8, Charles,” and Charles moved his lure in the water in a figure 8 pattern. Kenny fought to reposition the boat for another pass over the rock bar. “Keep casting, boys. Let’s get him.” With renewed vigor I stepped up my casting. “Short casts,” Kenny said. “Dig him out, boys.” After another 30 minutes of casting, however, I slipped back into my robot casting attitude. The fish was gone.

But, then, off the end of the bow just below the water surface, I saw what looked like a big log behind and following my bucktail. Then, It hit me! That wasn’t a log; it was the fish. A few more turns of the reel, and I saw the fish open and then close its mouth on the end of the bucktail. I jerked the rod and heard the giant splash of the fish as it felt the hooks and headed down. Kenny and Charles turned to see my rod bent in half against the weight of the fish. In not more than three seconds, the big fish leaped from the water, shaking its head to get free of the lure. It was magnificent. The fish that Kenny had hunted. The one to beat Swanson. Kenny struggled with the oars to keep the fish broadside. Charles quickly brought in his line. My rod bucked against the weight of the fish. The fish took another dive down. The line on the reel hummed as it was taken out. Another huge pull by the fish, and I grabbed the rod with both hands to keep from losing it, taking my thumb off the reel line. The reel spun, and kept spinning as the big fish slowed. And, then, suddenly, the line wasn’t going out as the fish pulled against a line that was knotted around the spool. Backlash!!! I looked down at the birds’ nest in my reel. Dear God, I hadn’t tended the reel line as I’d been told.

It was as if the musky sensed my predicament, and I felt the fish streaking up from the depths. It took a giant leap out of the water right in front of the three of us, giving me what later appeared in my nightmares as a contemptuous sneer, and with a murderous shake of

its head against the taut line I heard a sickening “snap.” The 30- pound test line broke as if it were thread, the fish hit the water with a splash and disappeared. Gone was the trophy fish. Gone was Kenny’s prized black bucktail. Gone were the bragging rights Kenny might have had at Guides Inn.

* * *

Kenny slumped on the oar bench. Charles simply exclaimed, “Wow.” I sat silently, overcome by feelings of failure and humiliation. My face felt hot.

After a near minute of deafening silence, Kenny said simply, “put ‘em away boys, that’s it.”

The ride across Tenderfoot, back the Ontonoga, and across Palmer to the boat landing took forever. Little was said on the drive back to Forest Lodge, other than Kenny’s comments punctuating my failure. “He was easy fifty inches and fifty pounds. Maybe the biggest fish I ever saw,” he said. “If I’d known about the backlash, maybe I could have done something. . . ,” his voice trailed off. I felt nauseous.

Lucy and Dr. K were awaiting our return to the Lodge, anticipating news of a successful fishing adventure for me. It wasn’t to be. Despite good wine and food, and consoling words from Lucy, the mood at dinner was subdued. Dr. K. spoke kindly of the big fish that he had lost and about how musky fishing tests character and teaches humility. I could only nod my head in agreement.

* * *

In the years following, I caught musky, including one with Dr. K at the oars which now hangs on my wall. But, for a very long time, I had nightmares about that big fish sneering at me as he snapped the line.

“The one that got away.”