

To Bring Home a Fish

by Doug Shepardson

Dearest Cousin,

Greetings from California.

I'm writing to express my condolences on the death of your father. A small glass of bourbon waits patiently on the table as the afternoon shadows grow deeper. What can I say? In the days of my youth, your dad was always my "Uncle Dan," my father's older brother. I'm sure you have many fond memories of him in this time of sadness. But I have some memories of him as well. If you don't mind, I'd like to share them with you.

I remember when we were kids how our summers never truly began until we took that two-hour car ride from our home in Hartford to the cabin that your dad built overlooking the lake. How my brother and I would excitedly lower the car windows and listen to the tires crunching on the gravel road as we bounced down the last quarter mile to Miller's Pond, a very small lake hidden in the pine forests of western Massachusetts. Your dad would shout a greeting and then proudly show us whatever project he was then working on - a floating boat pier one year, a solar water heater system the next, a 16-foot sailboat the next. Such works meant little at the time to a ten year old who only wanted to take that first elated leap from the end of the dock and then spend hours splashing in the cool waters with his cousins. We had no lake in Hartford, and my own parents preferred picnics in the park to swimming or fishing; it's just the way things were. I was happy when your dad once told me, "Glad you guys like the water so much. I'm the same way myself."

As a teenager, your dad had worked his summers on Salem fishing boats out of Cat Cove, while my father, your Uncle Ted, found work loading loaves of Cushman's bread into black and white home delivery trucks. Even as a child I recognized there was a difference between your father, who always wore plaid shirts and created things from stiff pieces of metal and wood with his rough brown hands, and my father, who spent his days in the office of an insurance company and whose soft white hands touched only pieces of paper.

Those were such wonderful summers. Remember how we played cards or checkers and talked and laughed late into the hot August nights because your dad insisted that there would be no television at the lake? Each and every evening the sky would fill with thousands of stars and we would fall asleep listening to a symphony of lapping waters and chirping bullfrogs. Those were good times, weren't they?

Then years later - do you remember? - in my sophomore year at Amherst, I stayed at your family home for a summer. It was good to see all the cousins again, and your dad said he could find a job for me with a local construction crew.

“Joe Turkman is a good guy,” he told me with a smile as he lit a small cigar. “He’ll be glad to take you on as part of his summer crew. He’ll work you hard, but you might have some fun, too.”

You may recall it was that summer - one of the hottest on record - that the J. T. Turkman Construction Company won the contract to install new telephone conduit under the sidewalks along Route 2A. I don’t know why your dad called Turkman a ‘good guy’. That man was a son of a bitch. A slave driver. He had us out there every day from sunrise to sunset, breaking sections of the old sidewalk with jackhammers, digging a ditch, laying the dull white PVC pipe, shoveling dirt over it, then hammering two-by-fours into long forms and pouring in concrete to create a new sidewalk. I never worked so hard in my life. Joe Turkman wouldn’t let you lean on your shovel for more than thirty seconds before he’d come over and yell at you, telling you to get back to work, his face red and twisted with anger. He even timed you when you went to use the port-a-potty. If you were in there for more than three minutes, he would bang on the door and yell at you to hurry up and finish! No matter how dead straight you nailed the two-by-fours or how perfectly you smoothed the concrete, there was never a word of praise from Turkman. The only comments that ever came from his mouth were negative, poisoned. I was not used to this. I grew to hate this man.

When that summer finally ended I was lean and tan with new strength hardened into my arms and shoulders. The evening of my last day of work I drove over to the Turkman house on the other side of the lake to pick up my final paycheck. A slow rage began to boil inside of me as I rolled thru the dark. *Who the hell did he think he was, telling me I was taking too long in the potty shack?* My plan was to tell the bastard off right after he gave me my check. I coasted down the last part of Turkman's dirt driveway in neutral with my lights off and took a big swig from the flat bottle of Jack Daniels in the glove compartment. No one was going to spoil this party. I tapped on the screen door and Mrs. Turkman invited me in with a finger held in front of her lips, as if to say "shhhh – quiet please."

She led me to their dimly-lit living room and said she would get my check. As I waited for her to return I let my eyes wander around the room. She had accumulated a large collection of antique music boxes that filled all the tables and bookshelves. And then I saw him – old man Turkman himself – passed out in a faded brown recliner, unlit cigar in hand. He was still wearing the green coveralls and muddy work boots that he stomped around in every day. His wife returned and handed me a white envelope that held my check. Well, the bastard Turkman was sound asleep. So I couldn't tell him off like I wanted to. Besides, his wife was quite cordial and there was no reason to be rude in front of her. I was about to mumble a polite ‘thank you’ and leave when, to my surprise, she took my hand and led me across the living room until we stood next to the sleeping form of her husband. His hair was dark and stringy and there was a dusty line of dried sweat around his neck.

"It's like this every night," she said softly. "He comes home, eats, and falls asleep in his chair. He doesn't even change his clothes."

Then she started sobbing softly, big tears flowing from her eyes. "He works so hard," she whispered. "So very hard. I hope people can appreciate what he is trying to do. He really believes the things he does will make a better future for everyone in the town. His whole life is his work."

At that moment my anger toward Joe Turkman, the meanest construction boss in the entire world, melted away in her tears.

He's just a guy working his ass off, I told myself. Digging holes and laying pipe so we can all have better phone service. And then coming home and falling asleep in his Laz-boy. I felt pity for him, and at the same time, shame, for my own anger. I shook his wife's hand and took my check and left.

Later, I thanked your dad for getting me the summer construction job. I told him about the impressive music box collection that Mrs. Turkman had assembled. Your dad laughed.

"Nope. All those beautiful music boxes you saw -- the missus didn't collect them. It's actually old Joe who collects them."

My apologies for digressing on Joe Turkman. But what I wanted to get around to was - I did hard labor that summer. Paul Newman-*Cool Hand Luke*-labor. Yet every day when I came home, dog-tired, there was your dad, asking if I could give him a hand with something. Could I get the lawnmower out and mow the front lawn? Did I have some time to help him put a new radiator in your old blue Volvo station wagon? Could I pull weeds for a few minutes from the strawberry patch out back before dinner? There was always something! And you know what? No matter how tired I was, I was happy to help; to do whatever your dad asked me to do. Looking back now, I don't know where I found the energy.

Remember when your dad rented that yellow Case backhoe to dig the huge hole for the swimming pool that he built behind your house? Then he calculated there should be a retaining wall on the slope below the pool. For the next two weeks I helped him shovel dirt and stack chunks of quarried granite until we had created a wall of natural stone. Jesus, those slabs of stone were a back breaker! The truth is, I didn't mind helping your dad with the work. It gave us a chance to talk. When dusk fell and it was too dark to continue, he'd kill the engine in the Case and lean back in the seat and light up a cigar. I think he enjoyed our talks as much as I did.

"What do you think the purpose of life is?" he asked one night, the tip of a Montecristo glowing in the fading light. The intimacy of his question surprised me. My dad would never ask me something like this. Being a marketing major, I replied with some baloney about the responsibility of corporations to develop technology to bring betterment to all mankind -- at reasonable prices, of course. He laughed and then replied in his husky New England drawl.

"The main thing a man needs to remember is - you have to bring home a fish." He paused and puffed on the cigar. "And not just a fish story."

"I don't understand," I finally said.

"You think about it. Someday, you will."

Another time we finished early and there was still some daylight and your dad climbed off the tractor and said, "Wait here. I'll grab us a couple of beers." He came back with two cold cans of Narragansett and a handsome box of polished dark wood. "Open it," he said. Inside was a replica 1860 Colt .44 Army revolver, like they used in the Civil War, with all its accessories.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" he smiled. Why don't we just shoot it off?"

He squeezed some powder and a lead ball into each of the six cylinders and then set his beer can on a branch about thirty feet away. Boom! Boom! Boom! Three shots echoed like thunder. He handed the gun to me. Boom! Boom! Boom! We laughed and inhaled the smoke from the gunpowder.

Your dad seemed to be blessed with endless internal energy that was constantly being channeled into *something* – planting or digging or banging at something with a hammer. He was a classic old New Englander -- a proud, stubborn Mason who could frame a house or build a sailboat or change the radiator in a car. He installed rooftop solar heating panels ten years before anyone else. Your dad could drive a tractor or fly a small plane or load a replica Civil War revolver and then shoot it in his back yard, just for the hell of it.

"The Constitution says every man should be able to keep a firearm", he said, putting the big pistol back in its box. "Course, there's some people you have to be careful about. Like the Japs. Let them get dressed up in uniforms and give them guns and they tend to go a little crazy. Course, we got all that straightened out at Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

"Maybe dropping the atomic bombs on Japan was unnecessary," I replied, using my best liberal arts logic. "Weren't the Japanese just about to surrender?"

"Not so," said your dad. "The Japanese were a long way from surrendering. They even wanted to hang onto some of their conquests as colonies. People forget what a tremendous engineering achievement it was, to create the first atomic bomb. Thousands of scientists and technicians all working together. Tremendous. And it was *absolutely* necessary. If we had to fight our way into Japan to make them surrender, probably a million more Americans would have died." He paused and a look of great sadness came to his face.

"World War Two was a horrible war. So many dead. It wasn't all glory like you see in the movies. It was a terrible time. But you can thank god that the atomic bombs helped save thousands of American lives. Japanese lives, too."

I didn't reply. But in bed that night, after thinking about it, I could see that maybe, just maybe, your dad was right. What I really began to see and to understand was, that there might be more than one way to look at things in the world; that sometimes, every coin would have two sides.

On my last day of that summer at your house your dad stuck a couple of Upmann cigars in my shirt pocket as we said good-bye.

“Enjoy these,” he said. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you that there’s something wrong with smoking some rolled up leaves.”

I don’t know how he obtained those Havana beauties. Buying or possessing real Cuban cigars then was illegal, banned by the Federal government.

As I drove through the rolling hills on my way back to Amherst I lowered the car windows and lit one of the cigars. It was good. The sun was shining. *Life was good.* I savored the pleasure of the moment. Then suddenly, I remembered how my dad had also enjoyed smoking cigars. How he’d take us for rides in the summer when we were just five or six, smoking a cigar with the windows rolled down, the radio playing. And then I remembered how in the fall we’d help him gather autumn leaves into great dusty heaps of red and gold and then watch while he set them on fire. We’d lean on our rakes in reverent silence while the piles burned and swirls of sweet, smoky aroma drifted into the sky...

And now -- now it is growing late. I sit here in the silence of the gathering darkness and take another sip of bourbon, reflecting on how much has changed in just a few short years. There are no more black and white Cushman trucks that deliver fresh bread to your front door. The Salem fishing fleet is gone. And now, as the government sternly and constantly reminds us - we know that cigars are bad for you. A dangerous health hazard. The same judgment has been passed on piles of autumn leaves. Dare to burn fallen foliage anywhere in the six New England states and you are subject to immediate arrest. The days of the aroma of burning maple leaves are gone forever, like so much smoke in the wind.

I must apologize -- I'm afraid I have rambled on longer than I intended. The damp cloak of night has descended over the California coast and my glass of bourbon is again almost empty. It’s just that the death of a family member gives one to pause, to stop and ask, *what is the meaning of all this? What are our lives for?* This afternoon I chanced upon a quote that I’d like to share with you. A woman named Molly Yard wrote, "*We are like the perennials that bloom. They're wonderful; they die, and then come back next year. Each generation blooms and dies, and then is replaced by the next wonderful generation.*" And so it is with us. After 85 years, your father, my Uncle Dan, is gone. His spirit has risen to join my father, your Uncle Ted, who passed on three years ago last month. Our fathers were part of the last generation. You and I, all of us, have followed and now flourish in our prime. But someday, it will be our turn to say 'goodbye'.

You might say that to describe the purpose of life as nothing more than one generation of lovely flowers followed by another is as good as anything else. But I’d like to add a bit more. I like to think the real purpose of life is to feel the summer sun burn your face before you take that exhilarating first dive from the dock into the cool lake waters below. The purpose of life is to listen to miracle of Andre Bocelli's voice, to share a bottle of wine with someone you love, and then another. To roll down the car windows and smoke a cigar and smile and laugh and sing along with the songs on the radio. To perform work you enjoy, to have a loving spouse, to give birth to children in good health and not worry too much about what comes next.

All of this, yes, but always -- *always* -- to provide the very best for those you love. The purpose of life is to bring home a fish, and not just a fish story.

Your dad brought home the fish to his family, many times over. This I know.

I am proud to say, even if it was just for some small moments in time, that I knew your dad, my Uncle Dan.

All the best to you, my dear cousin. Please share my condolences with your family.

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