

Isabelle Waller

Wisconsin

I only go fishing for one week out of the year. That's the week in August when all 50 members of my mother's extended family pack themselves into three cabins in northern Minnesota and have a grand time on Upper Whitefish lake. The week is as full of good memories as the cabins are with people, and to go a full day without heading out on a boat is a rarity. It leaves everyone with plenty of good fishing stories to bring home, which only stack up as the years go by. With my ignorance of fishing, my favorite memories of fishing have very little to do with what we actually caught. Actually, my favorite fish to catch wasn't even one we brought back to the shore. It was the first fish I ever kissed.

One of the quickest divisions that becomes apparent at Whitefish is who is squeamish and who is brave. I have cousins (and aunts) who won't even touch a fish, and I have cousins who come down to the fish house to get a look at intestines as we clean. Among those of us who can handle a little slime and blood, there is a bit of a competition over who is willing to do the grossest things. Even my grandmother gets into the goading, and is quite willing to tease anyone about kissing a fish before we throw it back.

That night, I was in Grandpa's boat. It's a tiny contraption rented from the resort, an old school rowboat with a motor and a whistle for a reserve gas tank. We set our anchor about thirty feet from the shore and measured out our drop lines. Drop lines are my favorite way to fish, because it's so incredibly direct. With a few fingers on the line, you can feel every attempted nibble. We sat out in the water for perhaps an hour, slowly depleting our snack reserves and talking about anything and everything.. I reeled in a few fish, and spent the time in-between

laughing and talking nonsense with the others.

When I felt this twitch on my line, I could tell it was going to be a big deal. I hauled it up, letting the taut line cut into my hand when the fish fought. I was excited, it was easily the biggest fish I'd had that night. When I pulled the fish into the boat, my first reaction was pride at its size. But, my second was disappointment. This fish was a largemouth bass, a fish my family never keeps because no one likes the texture. There would be no trophy to bring home. I tried a few times to get the fish off my hook, but failed and passed it up to Grandma. To my eight year old self, this was another disappointment. I was proud of the fact that I was willing to take fish off of the line by myself, and disliked any time I failed.

Grandma held the fish out to me before throwing it back in the lake. She didn't even need to say the words anymore, her teasing sign for, "Kiss it?" was well understood. I figured, why not? I may not get to bring home a big fish that night, but I could certainly bring home a story. I pressed my lips to its side, processing the cold, slimy feel of it. Then, I threw it in the lake as fast as I could so my arm was available to wipe my face. I was triumphant then, I may not have been able to bring my fish home, but I certainly had a story to tell.

Since then, several more of my cousins have taken on the challenge and kissed a fish goodbye. I've done it several more times myself. It's become another precious part of our fishing routine, one more set of memories to add to the growing pile. Sometimes, we care what fish we catch, sometimes we care only about outdoing each other, sometimes all we care about is having something to discuss when we get home. No matter what, I'll cherish those memories of time with my family, and marvel at the special (and sometimes ridiculous) moments that can be built in a fishing boat.