

**BEST
SHORT
STORIES
FROM
THE SATURDAY EVENING
POST
GREAT
AMERICAN
FICTION
CONTEST**

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The Daring Fisherman's Net

By Rob Magnuson Smith

On his lunch break, Nick walked home from Freddy Redmond's farm with his Army boots caked with shit. Mist rose from the trees in the surrounding hills. It had been a cold March, and the potholes held shattered ice.

A couple of cars passed. For the first time in ages, Nick didn't turn his face away. His name may have been associated with the stench of pigs these days, but he had a few things to be proud of. He'd kept up his weight. He'd shaved his beard. And for fifteen months, he'd stayed sober.

The Vista Apartments overlooked the bridge and river. Nick lived on the second floor. He climbed the stairs and found Raymond Batters passed out on the landing, jeans around his ankles, T-shirt wet with vomit.

"Hey. Move it." Nick looked across to the 7-Eleven as if for help. He placed his boot beside Raymond's nose.

Raymond lurched forward, then retreated to the wall. Nobody in Silt smelled particularly clean, but only Nick could raise the drunks. He reached his door and kicked off his boots. It was always a relief to be home, even if he lived among the dregs. In his apartment he had his cot, armchair, and stack of books on the desk. He rarely used the kitchen because he didn't eat much. In the evenings, he fought the urge to drink by taking poetry classes at Oakvale Community College, thirty miles east of Silt.

He sat on his cot with his back against the wall and fell asleep. He entered what might have been a dream, but soon awoke to a dimming field of images. Each day he longed to enter the world everyone else seemed to inhabit, to step sideways through some hidden door to find himself fully complete, memories intact.

He went outside and put on his boots. It was time to return to the pigs. Across the road, Raymond Batters was already making his way to the 7-Eleven to sit on the curb with his paper cup. He wore the same T-shirt. At least he'd combed his hair.

Somewhere in the building a child was crying. Nick clutched the metal railing until it paused for breath. In that short silence, his head finally stopped spinning. He found

himself rushing down the stairs, crossing the road and searching his pockets for money.

“Hell,” Raymond said as a twenty entered his cup. “You don’t have to do that, Nick. I’m only lookin’ to get a bottle.”

“I know,” Nick muttered, moving along. He hardly wanted to be considered generous. Generous men didn’t sign up for night raids to machine gun anything that moved. They didn’t squander forty-acre inheritances of wheat, or drink themselves into a coma, or defer their ambitions for the comfort of self-sabotage.

He walked the shoulder of the road out of town. Some abandoned cars had been collecting rain. In the last frost their windshields had exploded. At the river bottom, he turned into the Redmond farm. Oregon’s economies were supposedly updated — wheat to wine, lumber to marijuana, tractors to guns. The people of Silt still relied on pigs.

The sows were out in the first alfalfa. They lounged side by side, noses pointed at the horizon. The older breeders, with their thick brown bristles, were practically philosophers. The majority never made it past their first winter.

He went in the barn for his rake and came out into the pen. He liked the peace of the afternoons. In the mornings he had to be out in the middle of all twenty-nine of them. He had to keep the mean ones from attacking the meek as they surged the feeding trough, biting and snorting, kicking shit in the air. In alfalfa, pigs stayed civil.

The cold ground had trapped the heat. As he raked, tiny plumes of steam rose from the dirt like campfires. He looked up and saw his nephew sitting on the fence.

Nick put down his rake. He trudged over, half planning to drag Tom to school. But as he came nearer, the boy’s mournful blue eyes hardened into something approaching conviction. He was busy making twelve look old.

“Okay, tell me why you’re not in class.”

“Where’s Lake Powell, Uncle Nick?”

“Arizona. More importantly, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m not learning anything.”

“That, my friend, I can buy. But you won’t learn anything by watching me dispose of pig shit.”

A couple of crows were hopping toward them, as if to find out what the matter was. Nick stood glaring at Tom with as much outrage as he could muster. Eventually he went back to work. He’d made up his mind never to be hard on the boy. Anyhow,

Tom probably *was* learning something, looking out over the pig farm. He was the kind of kid who could.

“They sure are beautiful animals. Where do they get slaughtered, Uncle Nick?” Tom banged the heels of his sneakers against the fence. “In that barn?”

He should be spending more time with his nephews, Nick thought. His sister Jan, the boys’ mom, had bolted to Phoenix. With their dad finally dead — a belated gift by a rare charitable god — they were being foster parented by the Niedermysers, the elderly couple next door.

“See you,” Tom said. He jumped off the fence, scattered the crows and ran straight into the barn.

A pick-up was headed down the track. At the fence the truck stopped, and Glen McManus got out.

“Afternoon,” he said, coming right to the gate. “How’s it going, Nick?”

“Glen,” Nick said, eyeing him warily. After managing the grain depot for thirty years, Glen had run for mayor and won. He wore cowboy boots, a pink dress shirt, and jeans tight around the crotch.

“Whacked off that beard? Hell, Nick, you’re in danger of looking respectable.”

Something was coming, Nick knew — a piece of information, a request — and the burden of this was enough to make him want to run off as well. Instead, he worked his rake into the corner with his back turned.

“Betty Gustafson’s gone and retired on us.” Sighing, Glen spoke slowly as if to an old friend. “The school board’s been having problems finding someone to teach short-notice.”

“That’s because it’s Silt.”

Glen snorted. “Can you help?”

“Me?” Nick turned. Glen actually looked serious. “I’m not qualified.”

“You’re *published*. Published goddamn poet. And you’re taking courses at Oakvale.”

Amazing, Nick thought, how Glen knew this. Then again, he probably knew what his constituents had for dinner.

“The board remembers your dad, and the years he gave us.” Glen tucked his thumbs into his back pockets. “And we think highly of you.”

“Bull,” Nick said, under his breath. Everyone who mattered in Silt treated him the same — like he didn’t matter at all. “These night classes don’t make me a teacher. I don’t have a degree.”

“It’s only eighth grade. Willard’s got the math and science covered. Look, we have to get a substitute clear from Salem, just to do English.” Glen picked at his fingernails. “It’s *costing* us.”

Nick shook his head. Despite himself, he started moving his rake nearer. “It wouldn’t exactly come natural,” he said, peering over at the barn. He hoped Tom wasn’t listening.

“Rather be doin’ what you’re doin’ now?”

“Maybe.”

“I know you had your rough patches after Iraq. Rolling a platoon across the desert — for this?” He waved his hand across the pen. “Freddy says you’ve been a regular machine here. I *need* someone regular. You haven’t turned up at a bar in a while. I know that for a fact.”

“I don’t drink anymore.”

Glen lowered his voice. “Nick. Let me take care of the particulars. If I can be mayor without finishing high school, you sure as hell can teach.” Out in the alfalfa, a sow rolled over and kicked its hooves in the air. Nick leaned on his rake. He squinted into the cold sun as the back of his neck tingled with excitement. He imagined walking into a room of eighth graders. Every morning, he’d be dodging sarcasm, spit wads, germs.

“I guess it’s just artillery,” he said, thinking out loud. I’ll sleep on it.”

* * *

Somewhere on the road, a car approached. Sam looked out his window, where endless fields of wheat lay under the cold gray mist. He returned to his book.

John was a traitor to his father, Henry II. He murdered his young nephew to seize the throne. If anyone stood in the way, there was bloodshed.

A car pulled into the driveway — Neil Hackett’s ’67 Camaro with Arizona plates. Sam’s mother emerged from the passenger side. She’d become a thin sinew in a silver dress, hair chopped tight around her ears. The cockapoos followed her and started barking at the cold. It seemed their family reunion had begun.

Neil turned off the engine and got out. Tall and gangly, his stomach bloated like a child’s, he stood gawking at the Niedermeyers’ yard with his long arms at his sides. He’d been Silt’s quarterback the year they’d won State. Sam had first met him two years ago, the morning of his dad’s funeral — and ever since, he’d prepared. He’d pictured a day like any other, a day like this.

John might have been the most terrifying of England's rulers. His subjects cried, "Woe to the land whose king is a child!"

Closing his book, Sam imagined the police searching his room. They would try to determine what kind he was. His bed was made. His sharpened pencils lay in tight formation. This year's class rankings, tacked to his bulletin board, had his name on top.

He went to the mirror and checked his slacks, dress shoes, and Oxford. He was ready. He was even packed for Lake Powell, though they weren't going to get there, not today. It was a shame. Arizona would have been warm.

Downstairs, the barking filled the house. For a moment he stood without moving as the boy in the mirror looked back at him. Moderately overweight, his mother had called him. He untucked his shirt and checked the angle. His forehead looked thick, his nose fat as a fist. He tucked his shirt back in, a little loose.

There were footsteps on the stairs. He went to the mattress and checked underneath.

"Sam?"

Gloria's voice wobbled. Sam lowered the mattress quietly. "Yes?"

"Your mom's downstairs, honey."

He went to the door and opened it. Gloria stood in her plaid housedress, catching her breath. "Have you heard from Tom?"

"No."

"Dear Lord. We've had another call from school." She pressed her handkerchief to her chest and kept her voice to a whisper. "What will we say, honey?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

"Oh, Lord. Precious Lord. Come down, Sam. They're waiting."

He followed her downstairs. He was grateful for the time it took her. Gloria had had her hip replaced, and she kept stopping for the pain to pass. In the living room they were up on their feet to greet him, his mother and Neil Hackett and the two cockapoos sniffing at his ankles. Joel Niedermyer sat in his corner armchair, still in his overalls. He farmed solo. His stocking cap was folded over his knee, his thin gray hair stuck in the shape of a Mohawk.

Before Sam knew it, his mother was on him. "But — look how *big* you are!"

He felt his ears swell. He wanted to be the kind of fourteen nobody noticed. She held him out like a random purchase for return, her mouth twitching at the corners. "Shouldn't tuck that shirt in," she said, unbuckling his belt. "There."

“Christ, Jan. Don’t molest the boy!”

Neil stuck out his hand. Sam shook it. The man’s warm flesh revolted him. Neil looked like the photo in the high school trophy case, except with a tan.

“Ready for the lake?” Neil glanced over at the stairs. “Where’s your brother?”

“He’ll be home any minute,” Gloria said.

Sam sucked in his cheeks. He’d never once heard her lie. It seemed everything he’d taken for granted was suddenly in peril — the fraying sofa, the stacks of outdated magazines on the coffee table, the curtains stiff with starch. The dogs were sniffing Joel now. The old childless farmer, who Sam loved more than anyone else, kept his eyes fixed on a section of the wall.

“Molly, Sally — come here. Joel doesn’t like pets.” Jan squatted in her heels and opened her arms. The dogs scampered over to lick her face.

Neil jabbed Sam on the shoulder. “Look.” He pointed at his leather penny loafers. “Instead of pennies, I put a ten-dollar bill in each slot, folded nice and tight. Never know when you need extra cash, right?”

“I’ll make coffee,” Gloria said. “And I’ve got cupcakes set aside.”

“We don’t have time for snacks.” Jan smoothed her skirt. “The lake’s fourteen hours, driving straight. Where *is* Tom? He’s not answering my texts.”

Sam shrugged. Everyone was staring at him, even the dogs. He put his fingers under his hair and felt for the scar. It was where his dad once made him mind. “I really can’t say for certain. I haven’t seen him since last night.”

“What?”

“Now, Jan,” Gloria said. She kept twisting her handkerchief into knots. It was as if any deception took all her effort. “He’s probably on his way.”

“But he knew we were coming.” Jan looked at each of them in turn, and waited for someone to deny it.

“Maybe it has to do with that poem,” Joel said, to nobody in particular.

Gloria put her hands on her hips. “What’s this?”

“I was sitting here last night, around ten. Reading. I had the feeling someone was watching me. I looked up and saw Tom on the stairs.” Joel smiled as if remembering it. “He recited a poem. Something about a fisherman and his net.”

“The more daring the fisherman’s net is woven, so the better his catch,” Sam said. He didn’t add the next line. He held it in his mind like a diamond. “It’s by Novalis.”

“That’s right. That’s it, Sam. Afterwards, he ran out the door.”

“At ten o’clock at night? And you didn’t stop him?”

“He’s sure a fast runner.” Joel pressed his legs together. “Or I would have tried.”

“He could be over at Uncle Nick’s,” Sam said, his eyes lowered. “They’ve been discussing poetry.”

“You mean, in that horrible apartment?”

Sam nodded. His mother slumped beside Neil on the sofa. “That’s no place for a boy to spend the night. But you saw him today at school, didn’t you, Sam?”

“Jan ...” Gloria sat on the edge of her love seat. “I wanted to tell you before. Tom’s been missing classes. The school administrator called.”

“No. Why didn’t anyone call *me*?”

“Baby.” Neil rested his hand on her knee. “We live down in Phoenix, remember?”

There was a silence. The cockapoos started to whine. Sam stared at the quarterback’s hand on his mother’s bare knee. He pictured his next move, down to the last detail.

* * *

Nick felt he’d lost a degree of dignity this afternoon, considering Glen’s offer. It seemed some mysterious entity was out there, trying to guide him safely through his thirties. He might even be able to leave the Vista Apartments. He came up the stairs to his nephew sitting cross-legged on the doormat.

“Congratulations, I guess,” Tom said.

Nick kicked off his boots and unlocked the door. As usual Tom went straight to the books. He bent over a volume of Yeats, but Nick could tell he wasn’t really reading it. His clothes looked slept in. A bit of dirt had found its way into his ear.

Nick made two mugs of black tea with milk. He could hear his neighbors clattering pots for dinner. It was getting dark, and Tom was pushing his luck. Nick brought him his tea and took his own to the cot. He sat with his back against the wall and waited for the boy to talk.

“There’s still frost on the riverbank, Uncle Nick. Last night I waded in and let the water run right over my shoes. I had the whole place to myself. Ice cold, pitch black. I never wanted it to end. From now on, I decided, I’ll only do things that *matter*. Only people who matter and books that matter and not anything else.”

“I won’t ask what *matter*ing means, for now. But ... you never went home?”

“What for — to eat, sleep, and go to school? And go away with Mom and Neil?”

“They’re *here*? In Silt?”

“We’re supposed to drive to Lake Powell for spring break.”

Nick jumped off his cot. "Why didn't you tell me?" He half-expected Jan to appear in the middle of his apartment and start blaming him. She'd escaped her bad marriage and found refuge in golf, Neil's air-conditioning business, and diet pills.

"It doesn't *matter*." Against the wall, Tom was smiling slightly. "I'll tell you what does — how quickly the living die. Those pigs, for instance. You're the one who slaughters them, aren't you?"

"What?"

"And you've killed *people*."

"We've talked about this." Nick returned heavily to his cot. "I didn't see a lot of action, Tom." He'd used the phrase so often, it didn't sound deceitful any more.

"Mom says you probably got good at it. Sam said so, too. You ever think about those people you —"

"No." Nick's hands tightened around his mug. He felt himself slipping into a gray area. In the apartment below, doors were slamming. The couple on the first floor had begun their nightly argument. "I have to get out of this dump."

"You told me you were going to stay here and write poetry."

"You get older, Tom."

Someone knocked on the door. They both flinched. "I'm not here," Tom said.

"Me neither," Nick said, getting up. "Especially if it's your mother." He peered through the blinds. Raymond Batters waited bare-chested with his dirty shirt in his hand. Nick opened the door.

"You got any quarters for the washing machine? Those pricks at 7-Eleven won't give me change." Raymond noticed Tom and smiled. "Oh. Hi, kid."

"Hi, mister. Want some tea?"

"I'll get the quarters," Nick said, hurrying to the desk.

Raymond offered him a rumpled five. "All I got."

"Forget it," Nick said, closing the door.

Tom's eyes widened. "Wow. No shirt, even in the cold. And all he's got is *five bucks*. You sure you want to give this up for some normal job?"

How he longed for normalcy, Nick wanted to say. To be appreciated by someone other than a farmer, or a pig. But he couldn't tell Tom this, not when certain lies still carried weight. "Teaching's a good opportunity, you know. A chance for me to expand my skills."

"The more daring the fisherman's net is woven, so the better his catch."

"Well, then. Novalis. Where'd you read that?"

“Sam.”

“He’s into poetry now?”

Tom had gone pale. He drank the rest of his tea in great gulps. ‘I think there’s something weird going on. He keeps a hunting knife under his mattress.’

“Oh?” Nick was concerned, but he tried not to show it. “It’s not *that* weird.”

“A couple of nights ago he kept me up pretty late. Made me memorize two lines from that poem, just in case.”

“Just in case — what?”

Tom shrugged. “Like a savior, death gives succor to the wretched human race.” He wandered over to the desk. He sat down, picked up a book, put it back and rested his head in his arms. A minute later, he was asleep.

Nick paced the apartment. He had read that poem to Sam after their dad’s funeral. Slowly, far too slowly for anyone’s good, the man had drunk himself to death. There was a creature nobody had any business mourning. But Sam *had* mourned, because he’d taken on his shoulders what little his dad had to offer.

Tom was twitching. Beneath his eyelids, dreams were forming. Nick saw this and was jealous. One day, he too would sleep soundly. Meanwhile the knife and the Novalis worked away at him. He loathed his drunken choice of words.

I loved my dad, Sam told Nick that day. I don’t think he ever meant to be cruel. But now I feel guilty — because I often longed for him to die.

Nick had read the Novalis to him. They were out in the graveyard after everyone had gone home. He’d pointed at the setting sun. As long as there is anything left of that, he’d said, God keeps on killing. So the next time you confront a death, do so without fear. Do it with courage.

“I have to go now.”

Nick turned. Tom was sitting up and blinking at him. “Sam’s all by himself. He didn’t want a family reunion.”

“Text him to hang on.” Nick searched for his keys. He sent up his own request, to any charitable gods listening, to spare one this time.

* * *

John kidnapped his future wife in 1200. He fathered seventeen children and twelve illegitimately. He guarded his legacy closely.

Sam stayed at his desk when the knock came. The door opened, and his mother’s heels came clicking over. He remembered the day she’d left. He and Tom had stood at

the top of the carport to watch her drive off. Then they had to go back inside to face their dad. Every man, he'd said as he poured a drink, avenges the loss of his wife. Anything happens to me, you boys better do the avenging. Otherwise you'll be known as cowards.

"What are you reading, Sam?"

He looked up. "This? Just a piece of history."

"Your uncle called. He's on his way here with Tom."

Sam nodded. The ideal window of time, he knew, was quickly closing.

"Neil wants to see his favorite spot before we hit the road. Wanna join us?"

"Me?" He smiled as sweetly as he could. "I'm officially invited?"

"Always good to sneak in a walk." She leaned across his desk to the bulletin board. "First in your class?" For a second, she almost looked pleased. Then her eyes dropped as if into a bad memory. She had taken the worst of what his dad dealt. She started down the stairs, calling after the dogs. "Sally. Molly ..."

Sam lifted his mattress and found the knife. It was a six-inch Bowie encased in a leather sheath. He slipped it into his coat pocket. Quick and swift from behind, that's what had to be done. Too many shooters missed. With a knife there was only one outcome. There would be a lot of blood, but he wouldn't think of that now, he decided, and headed downstairs.

Gloria and Joel were pressed together on the love seat, trapped by the barking dogs. His mother put them on leashes and breezed outside.

"Exercise," Neil said, zipping up his raincoat. It looked like a new one. As they went out, Sam hurried along beside him.

"You know, talking to your mom on the way, we realized you might not understand why we left you boys in Oregon. It had nothing to do with how we feel about you. It was about starting fresh, and getting our A/C business to the next level."

Sam felt his ears throbbing. His mother had slipped off her heels to cross the field in her bare feet. She was taking the path around their old property, behind the combines shed where Tom used to knock tennis balls day and night.

"Looks like your mom's aiming for our spot. Where the two of us, where we kind of met."

The path plunged through the elms. Across every acre of their old land, the new owners had dug out the wheat. They were starting a vineyard. The weeds had been pulled, the farmhouse painted a deeper green. Even the giant oak, Sam noticed, had grown new branches. It was as if evil had the capacity to mask itself.

At the last stand of elm before the river, Jan turned and continued to explain. Neil pressed on, passing them with his long quarterback legs.

“It was fear, Sam. I couldn’t stay. Anxiety, and fear of what your dad would ...” She drew in her breath. “Being somewhere warm, it helped with that. And being with Neil. You understand.”

Sam reached for his coat pocket. All he heard was wind rushing through the trees. She abandoned them, he repeated to himself, and there was no getting around it. She would grieve now, just as he and Tom had. In one simple act a balance would be struck, a scale tipped toward justice.

The dogs stopped beside her and whined. When she bent down, they stood on their hind legs to lick her face. Then Neil was beside them as well, bending down — and the dogs licking his open mouth.

“See? I love your mom so much, I let her smelly dogs French kiss me.” Neil looked up and laughed. Behind his little round eyes, there was a soul.

“Hey, Sam — where are you going so fast?”

He took off for the river. It wasn’t supposed to go this way. Neil had looked at him with a plea for forgiveness.

The sun had apparently set. There was no way to know for certain, not with the clouds so dark and low. Sam ran straight into a curtain of fern with icy fronds. How he hated the cold. Never once had he woken up in a place like Arizona. His mother was coming after him like a fugitive with her dogs. He stayed well in front, shoes crunching the undergrowth.

He stopped at the river. The water was high on the banks. Only the biggest rocks were visible through the rapids, where streaks of silver glinted in what remained of the daylight.

He knelt and took the knife out. His hands trembled as he unsheathed its jagged blade, and he nicked his finger. Nearby, a ruptured tree trunk lay on its side, its pulp swarming with ants. He could smell the rotting wood. It was as if nature had begun to destroy itself.

“There you are. You know, I’m *worried* about Tom. Is he going to be okay?”

Sam wheeled, the knife behind his back. He could feel blood trickling down his skin. “Why do you care?”

“Oh, I’m a bundle of nerves. Making you mad, I can tell.”

He came toward her. He looked straight into her eyes, right down into their pale blue depths. She seemed locked in the hope that she might miraculously awake, one morning, a different person.

“Tom’s going to be fine, Mom.”

She nodded. “It makes me glad that you’re there for him.” She stuck her bare toe into a clump of moss.

Sam couldn’t see straight. He couldn’t think. He sat beside the rotting trunk, scooped up some ants and let them crawl around his bloody fingers. Then he plunged his knife into their little nest.

The dogs were barking. His mother unclasped their leashes, and they ran into the shadows. “Go on. Be free!”

Sam stayed where he was. He pictured Neil draining away, all over his raincoat. A gun would have been easier. Those school shooters, as they were taken off in handcuffs, looked like they’d just played a video game. Maybe it wasn’t possible to avenge a single thing.

Neil arrived with a limp. He was holding his knee. “One dirty tackle ...” He sat down and took off his shoes. “This is the place. Hey, where’s your mom?”

Sam looked around. “She appears to be gone, Neil.” He didn’t have the heart to tell him the truth — that she used to bring his dad to that very spot. In summers, they would all come for a picnic. They’d bring sandwiches and iced tea.

There were memories in every tree, every shadow. Sam glanced at the knife buried in its rotten trunk. He got quickly to his feet. He picked up Neil’s penny loafers, with their ten-dollar bills tucked into each slot, and he chucked them into the river. They floated downstream like evidence of a drowning.

“Hey!” Neil said, his face reddening. “What the hell?”

Sam started walking. Behind him, Neil’s protests faded like cries of the doomed. He took the bend in the river for home and spotted his mother in the middle of the rapids.

“Mom,” he called. “Come on back. Time to go to Arizona.”

She had made it onto a high flat rock. Her arms were outstretched like a ballerina with her chin pointing at the sky, and between her legs the river rolled and rolled. She often pulled stunts like this, back when they were more or less a family.

Rob Magnuson Smith (“The Daring Fisherman’s Net”)

Rob Magnuson Smith is the author of the novels *The Gravedigger*, *Scorper*, and *Seaweed Rising* (slated for publication in 2023). His short fiction has appeared in *Ploughshares*, the *Guardian*, *Granta*, *Fiction International*, *The Greensboro Review*, and *MoMA Magazine*, among others. He has won the Pirate’s Alley William Faulkner Award for the novel and the Elizabeth Jolley Prize for short fiction. For more, visit robmagnusonsmith.com.