

Fish Rules

Memoir

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Growing up can be marked by the revelations one has through the years. Most come and go without much notice, because when you're young and dumb, you learn new things every day. I've found that the realizations don't ever stop as you get older, or at least I hope they don't. Now, as I mark the gray whiskers invading my beard, I'm still surprised by things I hadn't known that I now finally grasp. Maybe it's just the way my brain works, but that gray glob up there seems to resist learning a thing until it decides I'm good and ready. Then again, perhaps that's true for everyone. If what we're shown on television and in movies or what we read in many books is any guide, love is something you should innately understand. It's instinct. It's heart. But sometimes it's not. Sometimes we're *made* to realize our affections. Those revelations of the heart, the ones with true importance, stick with you. Those are the ones that pop into your thoughts when triggered by a sight, sound, or smell. For me, there is one that remains fresh despite the years that have piled upon a day I was pushed toward insight.

I am ten years old. I go to church every Sunday and understand very little of the teachings therein except to be "good" or else Hell will be my life's destination. My parents are no longer together, and I understand this even less than what it means to be "good". I'm the youngest of five children, the smallest addendum to a merger that apparently no longer exists. Ten is a very confusing age. Well, for me it was a confusing age and so I'm choosing to group everyone else with me for the sake of my sanity. We love our parents; we'd be stupid not to. They made us, and although we may not fully grasp the biology of how that happened, we get it. Sibling love, however, is more mysterious. Sure, we say we love them, because Mom and Dad make us say so. But, who's to know how the natural competitive animosity between brothers and

sisters could ever congeal into acceptance and then crust over into love? I'm thinking it's not a gimme. Parents preach familial love as if it's the law, probably because it's hard to conceive that their love would spawn anything but miniature copies that can't help but love each other. It's expected and relied upon like gravity. Anyway, maybe these thoughts are going through my head as I walk home from Lakeview Elementary, or more likely, I'm thinking about Franco Harris and the Pittsburgh Steelers. Memory is tricky.

The closer in age you are to a sibling, the more pugilistic the relationship. Such is the case with my brother Jack and me. Separated by four years, different bodies, and personalities, we fight like the pigheaded fools we both are. Joined by family, proximity, and a weekly trip to St. Mark's Catholic Church, we struggle with good versus bad and the guilt born of our actions. Not all our confrontations are physical, we employ a steady stream of psychological warfare, too. Teasing and insults tend to be our primary method of communication, but there are moments when we're able to put aside hostility in lieu of wiffle ball or basketball. On any given day, it's hard to tell if we love each other, hate each other, like each other, or merely tolerate each other. I know Jack could beat me to a pulp if he wanted to. For my mom's sanity, we try to stay in our own lanes, on different roads, with unconnected friends. Meals and family trips are unavoidable tinder boxes, but we can behave with effort when necessary.

Aside from family relations, there is an accepted hierarchy for kid behavior. Kids are like fish; the big ones eat the little ones. So, age naturally separates us, and for the most part, keeps us civil. However, some fish either don't understand the rules, or think social rules don't apply to them. "Mom, he's picking on me!" is something every mother hears. We must pick; it's not only fun, but it also alleviates boredom. In the wild, picking is most acceptable as a trickle-down principle: big fish pick on little fish, consequently keeping them in line. When the reverse occurs,

someone's gonna get hurt. This is often the case in sibling strife. If the youngest steps out of line, the elder sibling has no choice but to redirect the offender. I often put Jack in this predicament: then I ran. The ensuing chase was often punctuated by the previously mentioned objection, which was inevitably voiced in the whiny tone common to children of all ages. Conversely, when the fish rules are broken outside of the family unit, then you have a conundrum. Humans, unlike fish, aren't supposed to harm those smaller than themselves; it's not "good". Ding, Dong, Hell is calling – at least for those of us from our church.

David is eight and lives up the street from me. He is an only child, a brat, and I don't like him. Spoiled by parents that own a nicer house than mine, David is often seen riding his brand-new, top of the line bike, or playing on his deluxe swing set and fort in his yard. All his sports equipment is pristine, and he doesn't have to wear hand-me-down clothes. My block boasted a lot of kids that, as kids do, clumped into play groups and formed individual alliances. Those with similar likes naturally bonded and lasting friendships formed. None of the rest of us came from wealth and most of us had at least one sibling which was great for group sports and games like kick-the-can. David fit into no group, in truth, he was only ever invited out of desperation to even out teams. His abrasive personality and air of superiority turned off not just me, but all the kids. Nonetheless, whenever he could, he pushed his way into neighborhood games uninvited. Once in, he would inevitably proceed to dismantle the camaraderie with his behavior. Thus, all activities that included David always ended with an explosion and an abrupt end to what should have been a good time for all. To rub salt in the wound, David's parting shot was often telling all of us that he was leaving to play with some new toy that no one else had or could afford. The rest of us sat in the destruction of his making, watching him stomp away in his brand-named clothes up the street to his beautiful home. Left to grudgingly help put away game pieces, I often

ruminated on the fish rules while contemplating the damage to my soul should I happen to punch David.

I can admit now that I was jealous. David's neatly mowed grass was definitely greener than my trodden splotchy lawn. I couldn't appreciate that my yard looked like it did because of the high kid traffic it endured, where David's only had to handle him on most days. All I could see was a bratty, arrogant goblin that talked too much. I wasn't yet equipped with the empathy to recognize that he may be lonely and that's why he acted like he did.

Attention starved or not, David is totally oblivious to the fish rules. He constantly picks on me, and I am stymied by what I should do. He is smaller than me, and if I give him the beating he deserves, my Catholic guilt will surely smash me through the sidewalk and push me straight to Hell, no stops! But I'm nearing the end of my rope; after all, he's PICKING ON ME! Does he sense my inner turmoil and use that against me? Is this little jerk really a diabolical genius? If he were my little brother, I could simply pound him, accept my parental punishment, and all would be right in the world. However, those who beat up the weak are bullies. I'm not a bully – or at least I don't think I am, am I? Would I be labeled a bully if I punched just one weakling? Just one? Named David? I simply want a little peace, without this little parasite eating my confidence in front of everybody. This is what I'm praying for as I'm walking home from school among schoolmates with David in tow like a scrap of toilet paper flapping from my shoe.

Halfway home from school on the right side is the Jenson's house, one of my favorites. As if from another time, the house is brick with a tile roof and its perfectly mown lawn is separated from the sidewalk by a paling of spiked wrought iron. I've even heard there's a spiral staircase inside, how cool is that? The fact that I'm now in front of this anticipated spot

somehow makes my struggle worse. My head is down, and my shoulders are hunched in a blue jean tortoise shell to my foe. David must sense my unrest because the picking escalates. I can feel the ropes that hold my internal strongbox of control unraveling, the individual cords snapping as the box itself groans under the mounting pressure. Hell, get ready, because I can't take it anymore! Resigned to whatever fate may come, I stop walking and make a fist with my right hand. Slowly I turn counterclockwise on the spot to face the object of my soul's deterioration. Right fist to my cheek, I blink, surprised because David's no longer there. Catching movement from the corner of my eye, I continue to rotate left and see my brother, Jack. Without a word or glance from my brother, Jack had yanked a dumbfounded David off his feet by the back of his jacket. In one effortless motion, my brother shifts his grip to David's coat front then deftly hangs my nemesis on one of the spikes of the iron fence. With his expensive running shoes dangling two feet above the ground, David whines, "Get me down!" But Jack is already gone. My hands drop as I stare after my brother who walks unhurriedly toward home, seemingly carefree. As if choreographed despite our growing separation, Jack and I shove our hands in coat pockets at the same time. Grunting and helpless, David flops like the little fish he is in front of what is now my absolute favorite house.

I feel... well, love. My brother, my punching bag that hits back, has just saved me from Hell. Sparing a single, triumphant glance toward David, and chuckling at the look on his face, I resume my now blissful, peaceful walk home. I remember a story from church as I stroll, and a more wicked laugh escapes me when I realize I just witnessed a biblical reversal of David and Goliath! With the protests of David fading into the background, my mood lightens considerably. Admittedly, I'm not completely free from guilt because a part of me worries about David and I wonder how long he'll hang there before someone takes pity on him. But my overwhelming

feeling is gratitude for my brother. Jack took my burden, without any fanfare, so I wouldn't become something repugnant, a bully. That is so very cool. Some could argue that a bigger fish stole my bait, but hey, I think it's better than Hell. I'm so relieved and so proud that I can't help but smile all the way home.

I learned why we love our siblings that day. Apparently, I'm rather thick, because I needed it hung in front of my eyes to see it. And yes, I'm exaggerating because I *probably* had an inkling as to why I held some affection for those I sat next to for dinner. But that's the thing - our brothers and sisters are right there in the trenches with us, watching our backs. They often do the work that the parents can't. Siblings can be the safety of our homes when we're not home. To this day, I know I could bring any problem to my brother, and he'd try to help, this is a comfort. For the rest of our lives, I will always do the same for him; this is love.