SNAGGED

BY JOHN MCCAFFREY

The pike rose and slapped its tail across the creek's placid surface, near a bend traversed by a thick, low-hanging oak branch. My father, standing in the waist-deep water, recoiled from the sound. He'd been probing the bank with the front half of his boot, searching for the entrance to a muskrat's underwater tunnel where he would place a trap.

"Did you see that?" I shouted, pointing at the retreating oval water swirls.

My father whirled. Although at ease in the woods or the water, having grown up carrying a shotgun or a fishing rod, he was startled by the rise. "Was that a fish?" he said, his voice tightening.

"I think so," I responded. "I saw its tail."

Toby, our black Lab, whose dangling patch of white chin hair made him appear much older than his three years, bounded up, most likely thinking our raised voices indicated prey to pounce on or track. I reached down and pulled a briar off the top of his head, scarred from numerous epic battles with raccoons, cats, andfemale dogs that had rejected his rabid sexual advances.

"What kind of fish is it?" I asked.

My father whistled through his long white teeth and then wiped his runny nose with the back of a chapped hand. "Don't know. Never seen one in here before. What color was it?"

I was about to answer when the fish resurfaced, closer this time, just a few feet from the bank. It was a sunny morning, and a dots of sunlight, fragmented through the oak's thick spray of leaves overhead, spread out across the water like tiny comets atop thewaves generated by the fish's splash. My father immediately surged out of the creek, slipping twice while scrambling up the steep bank, streaking mud across his arms and chest.

"What is it?" I shouted.

My father licked his lips and spit flecks of mud onto the ground. He pulled a handkerchief from inside his green hip waders to clean his glasses. While he polished the lenses, he peered into the creek. "A pike, I think."

"How do you know?"

"The torpedo-shaped body. The long and flat lower jaw. The muddy coloring. Definitely a pike." He nodded his head a few times with slow purpose. "Trust me," he said, "they're vicious. You got to be careful, especially when you unhook them. They have teeth like razors." He snapped his thick

fingers, “Cut you like that."

I reached under Toby's collar and pulled him away from the bank.

“What do they eat?"

“Pike,” my father snorted. "Anything, really. Worms. Smaller fish. Turtles. Frogs. I caught one as a kid on a little ten-pound test line and a jig.” He paused a moment. “We'll buy you a spinning rod and start bringing it with us. If we see it again, you can try a few casts. I think a lure is best. If that doesn’t work, you can try and snag it.”

"Snag it?"

“It might be spawning. A fish won’t eat when it’s laying eggs; won’t strike a lure or go for bait. So you have to snag it.” He jerked his hands toward his torso. “Yank the hook into its body.”

I winced. "Does that hurt, snagging?"

"Don’t be silly.” My father spat into the creek. “Fish don't feel anything.”

It isn’t hard to locate a muskrat's burrow, which rests on the shore like a large mud cyst. But finding its hole, its underwater entrance, takes know-how and patience. My father had both. Encased in waders, he would lower himself into the creek, directly in front of the bulging burrow, and systematically kick his right leg forward. When he found what he wanted, when his boot punctured an air seal, he would ask me to pass him a trap. These were killer traps, gray-metal squares just wide enough for a muskrat’s body or a man's fist, doubled in width, to pass through. My father told me they got their name because they killed instantly; that is, the muskrat, upon leaving the burrow, would take its last breath in the narrow tunnel. That’s because on its way out, with an eye on the flowing weeds and passing silt, it would bump into a piece of gray wire, thin as straw, suspended and unmoving in the current. And before the muskrat could swim around or even sniff this alien object, the rest of the trap, two flat cold jaws, would snap together, crushing its neck.

Before he could crush a muskrat's neck, however, my father needed to set the trap. It took strength and effort to pull a killer trap apart and engage the spring mechanism, particularly if it was rusty, as most got after a few years of use. My father would load the trap while standing in the water, the last step before wedging it into the muskrat's hole. I always worried he would lose his grip and the metal jaws would crash down on his wrist, snapping it like the yard-long birch branches we used to mark and hold the traps. But my father never slipped, and no matter how high the water rose from a rain or how strong the creek's current, the stakes held and we never lost a trap.

During muskrat season (October to February), we always set traps on Thursday evenings after I got home from school. My father, who taught shop at a local high school, would be waiting for me, a burlap bag filled with traps already packed into our family’s car. It was a ten-mile drive from our house to the creek, which crawled through a private farm located in a neighboring county. It was the farm owner’s slightly illiterate son, whom my father once taught and helped get a decent-paying factory job after graduation, who granted us the privilege of trapping the creek. "We’re afraid our horses are going to break their legs on the goddamn muskrat holes," he told my father. "No one’s ever trapped here before. You want to?"

On Saturday mornings, we checked the traps. My father would lead the way, scanning a makeshift map of stake locations he had sketched on looseleaf. I would trail behind, dodging clinging briars and red-tipped pussy willow branches that coiled around my father’s legs and whipped backward at my chest and stomach with surprising force, generating a sting even through my thick parka. Toby, who always came with us, followed his nose. He would leave the car in a rush and spend the entire time with his head down, dodging in and out of heavy brush and sprinting across open fields, scaring up pheasants, and barking helplessly as their heavy wings lifted them off the ground and away from his snapping jaws.

The bag I carried on Saturdays, the muskrat bag, was bigger and thicker than the trap bag. It was lined with plastic to ensure that no blood from the animals would soak through and stain my clothes or the car’s interior. When we approached a stake, I would sprint past my father, the bag bouncing off my shoulder, and peer into the weeds and water. "We got one," I would shout at the sight of brown fur swaying in the current or jutting out of newly formed ice. If we’d been “skunked,” if the

water flowed unimpeded around the trap or the ice was smooth and clear, then I would turn to my father and shrug, my signal for a non-kill.

Whatever the outcome, my father would enter the creek, either to collect the dead muskrat or to move the trap to a more productive location. It was during the former, as my father passed a waterlogged muskrat to me, that the pike made another appearance.

A muskrat looks just like a beaver except it doesn't have a beaver's wide, flat tail. Instead, it has a rat-thin black tail as long as a little boy's arm. At home, my father would take the bag of dead muskrats (five would be a good day) to our backyard shed where, one by one, he would tie their hind legs to two long pieces of string hung at eye level from an overhead beam. He would then skin them raw with razor blades. It was rare, when opening the lid of our garbage can during trapping season, not to see their hairless bodies bleeding into old newspaper.

Although my father never asked me to help him skin the muskrats, he did ask me to load the pelts, hung in the shed's rafters for weeks on snowshoe-shaped metal drying racks, in our car and accompany him on the season-ending visit to the local furrier, a barrel-chested man who would calculate the worth of each pelt with a quick grope of his thick white fingers.

My father was a slow driver, but what should have been - even at his pace - a half-hour ride to the furrier always extended into an hour as he crept along back roads, giving an ongoing monologue of the season's trapping highlights: the time Toby caught a muskrat outside its burrow and killed it with one stomp of his paw; how scared I was on the ink-black, moonless night when a whooping crane flew overhead, its piercing shriek sounding like a woman being strangled; the deer that ran past us one morning, its belly bleeding with buckshot; the bull cow that got loose from its pen and chased us into the creek.

By the time we pulled up to the furrier's home, a trailer with a pool-sized satellite dish in the front yard, my father had talked himself out and would barely have the strength to push the car door open, let alone sufficient energy to haggle with the furrier who usually gave him $8 to $10 per pelt.

My father took me to Sears to buy the spinning rod. My mother and sister came along but were directed to another part of the store to look for clothes. When shopping, which he hated and rarely did, my father eyed the sale. But when it came to hunting and fishing equipment, he bought quality and never skimped on price. For my spinning rod, he did not even look at the "fishing kits" that caught my eye: rod, reel, and lure sets wrapped in cellophane with illustrated cardboard backdrops of young boys battling flying marlin and teeth-baring sharks. I remember my father pushing me away from the kits and toward the adult section where poles as tall as my bedroom ceiling sat neatly in racks, and reels reeking of fine oil spun effortlessly to the touch.

"How does this feel?" my father asked, handing me a thin white rod with red eyelets and a black foam handle. "It's a good brand," he said. "Twenty-four dollars."

"I don't know," I answered, handing back the rod and pointing to the fishing kits. "Can we look at those?"

My father ignored me and attached a dull metallic-brown reel to the rod's base. When he had slipped it into the fasteners he said, "Try reeling. See how you like it."

I reeled fast, pulling back on the rod and swinging it side to side like a saber, pretending to be like the boys on the backs of the fishing kits dragging in monster marlin and dangerous sharks. "Don't act stupid," my father said. He took the rod from my hands and played with the reel a little and then said, "This is a good setup. It'll hold that pike, and you can use it in the summer for bass and crappie, too."

"Can I pick the lure?" I asked. Each kit came with a Daredevil lure, teardrop shaped and striped white and red with a shiny gold treble hook, that was obviously deadly to big fish.

My father gripped the spinning rod and shook it twice. "What?" he asked.

"Can I pick the lure? I think I know what will work on the pike."

My father snorted. "OK, but hurry up. Meet me at the counter."

I sprinted to the lure bin and picked up a Daredevil, careful to hold the three-pronged hook away from me. When I got to the counter, my father took it from me and laid it next to the rod and reel and a curved thick hook, the size of my pinky, embedded in a lead sinker.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at the gruesome hook.

My father pulled an envelope from his pants pocket. It was yellow and worn. I recognized it as the envelope he stored his trapping earnings in. He extracted several bills. "It's a snagging hook, in case the pike won't take the lure."

"Oh," I said.

My father hung my spinning rod in our garage next to his larger poles. I was proud to have a spot on the wall and would go to the garage before dinner, take down my pole, and imagine I was fighting a big one, just like the boys on the fishing kits. But in my imagination, the fish always took my Daredevil lure, bit down hard on it. It was a willing contributor to its own capture, not victim to a snagging hook dragged into its body.

It was a Saturday morning, a day to collect muskrats, when my father told me to bring my new rod. As we drove to the creek, I was thrilled with the idea of casting for a fish on my own and reeling it in. But as I went to grab the pole from the car, my father told me to leave it. "You can go back and get it if we see the pike. Otherwise you'll have a hard time holding both the muskrats and the rod. You don't want to drop the reel. Dirt will ruin it."

I shrugged behind him with the bag, deflated. However, at the first stake, as my father pulled a dead muskrat from a trap, I heard, but didn't see, the pike's splash just a few feet downstream. "Get your rod," my father ordered, dropping the muskrat and the trap into the water.

I sprinted to the car, gulping for air and tripping repeatedly as the hood of my parka fell over my eyes. When I returned, I held the rod in one hand and the Daredevil lure in the other. My father was out of the water and on the bank, shooing Toby away from the dead muskrat next to his feet. "Look," he whispered, pointing into the creek. "In front of the stake."

I inched to the bank and peered down. The pike floated near the opening of the muskrat's hole, its dorsal fin piercing the water.

"Here, hold Toby," my father's voice remained low. "I'll put the lure on." I handed him the pole and the Daredevil. He slipped it on the black metal leader, laid out some line, and handed me the rod. "Try a few casts. Be gentle. Cast it out soft. Make it look natural. Bring it to him. Don't cast at him."

I walked to the bank, stopped, undid the spool, drew the rod back, and put too much into the cast. The lure landed across the creek and fixed itself into a patch of weeds. I yanked on the line and the lure leaped from the brush and splashed several times across the surface. "Sorry," I mumbled.

"Just reel," my father said. "It's OK."

I reeled fast, the lure laden with weeds. The fish hadn't moved. I cleared the lure of debris and cast again, this time hitting the middle of the creek, just a few feet behind the pike. As the lure skimmed past the fish's dorsal fin, I held my breath, but it didn't budge, just swayed with the ripple caused by the lure's wake. After about ten casts my father asked, "Did you bring the snagging hook?"

My face flushed. "No, I forgot."

My father held up the dead muskrat. "Where's the bag?" he asked.

"I brought it back to the car and left it."

My father sighed. "Keep fishing. I'll get the snagging hook and the bag. If it strikes, take your time. Don't jerk the line. Let him take the lure into his mouth. If you get him on, don't give any slack that

he can use to spit the hook."

I watched my father walk away, Toby trailing behind, sniffing and jumping at the dangling muskrat. I turned and checked on the pike; it was gone. I was relieved. With the fish out of sight, I knew the snagging hook would not be used. I brought the rod back and cast again, reeling with my head turned, straining to hear the muffled sounds of the car door closing, Toby barking, my dad's rough voice. When the pike hit, I thought I'd caught weeds again. The fish's strike was not violent; it was gentle, almost submissive. It was only seconds before I pulled it out of the water and onto the bank.

As the pike flopped on the dried mud, gasping for air like an asthmatic, I saw clearly that the hooks were embedded in its belly; I'd snagged it. I bent down and fingered the spot where the metal barbs had punctured the flesh. At my touch, the fish started to shake and spasm until the lure spurted from its taut skin and landed near my boot. I stood still, watching the pike roll and spin, leaving a thin trail of bright red blood. I could hear my father and Toby approaching. The pike wiggled closer to the creek. My father's shout cut through the air. "Any luck?"

The pike's snout was inches from the waterline. I turned and walked up the bank and toward my father and Toby.

"Did it hit the lure?" he asked, fingering the snagging hook. "Is it still in sight?"

I paused for a moment. My throat tightened.

My father peered over my shoulder, caught sight of the bright red bloodline leading to the creek, the pike slipping into the water. "Hey!" he shouted. "You caught it!"

He sprinted past me, Toby at his heels. His feet gave way on the muddy decline, and he skidded on his backside into the creek. His splash coincided with the pike's, its tail thrashing in the shallows, propelling it forward like an underwater bullet, safely away from my father's grasp.

I stepped backwards as my father struggled back up the bank, water dripping from his waders, mud smeared across his coat.

"How did it get off the hook?" he wiped mud away from his lips. "Why didn't you pull it up into the weeds, away from the water, and wait for me?"

Tears welled in my eyes. I turned and coughed into my hand.

My father's eyes narrowed. He chewed on his lower lip and softened his voice. "It nipped you, didn't it?" he asked. "Or tried to. You went to unhook it, right, and it snapped at you. So you dropped it and the hook came out. I wouldn't blame you for that. Is that what happened?"

"Yes," I lied. "I got scared. I wanted to keep it."

"It's OK," he said. "That happens. I'll have to teach you how to unhook a big fish. It's my fault I never did."

He dropped the snagging hook into his pocket and walked past me to where the rod lay on the ground, the reel facedown in mud. He picked it up and flicked clumps of dirt off the spool. "At least this is something we'll talk about, right? The day you almost caught a pike." He snorted and handed me the rod.

"C'mon, let's check the rest of the traps."

I followed him.

John McCaffrey holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York. His short stories, book reviews, and essays, have appeared in *Fiction*, *KGBBAR.LIT*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Word Riot* , and other literary periodicals. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he was part of *Flash Fiction Forward*, an anthology published (Summer 2006) by W.W. Norton & Company, which contained stories by noted writers such as Paul Theroux, Ann Hood, Rick Moody, and Dave Eggers. More of John's work can be accessed at www.jamccaffrey.com.