

Beef Jerky

Aaron Sommers

Uncle Fritz told me it was easy. He said it was so easy even an idiot could do it—meaning of course I'd know how.

It was a good thing Uncle Fritz wasn't a teacher, because he'd have been a real shitty one. Instead, he was just a successful dermatologist, which of course meant he popped zits like nobody's business. There wasn't a pizza face in our town that didn't get a good look-over from my uncle. He'd grimace under that big bright light, examining your pimples like they were uninvited guests with bad breath. Then he'd pop them with this metal poker-thing and give you some expensive cream that smelled like ass.

He made loads of money doing that.

He even published a book that was a big hit. A hit among geeky doctors that is, but it still made waves. It's called *Making the Best of Boils*. I read it last year. It's about the history and treatment of boils, but it also has this story in it. About this guy who learns to embrace his condition. He walks around town looking like the Elephant Man, but all the censorious looks and whispers just make him proud. He's different and that's a source of power. It's an original story, pregnant with meaning and the best part of the book. But the rest of it was boring and the pictures made me want to throw up.

When we made it out to the middle of the lake, out into the real deep spot, Uncle Fritz told me to shut off the engine. He placed his tackle box on his lap and opened the trays. Each one held a group of handmade lures. This time he chose two bright blue ones and told me to watch closely as he threaded the line through it. I watched him, but a group of teenage girls were sunbathing on the dock. I couldn't decide if one of them had a tattoo on her back or a birthmark. Uncle Fritz was yelling at me.

"Hey, you listening to me?"

"Yeah, I'm listening."

"No, you're not."

"I was, I'm—"

"Shut up and watch me. See what I'm doing?"

"Please don't tell me to shut up, Uncle Fritz."
"I didn't say shut up. I said shup. Now watch closely."

By the time the lures were threaded and the sinkers were submerged in the perfect spot, my stomach growled audibly. He woke me before five that morning, and refused to make breakfast, because he said hunger is the best motivator. I eyed the cooler for the first hour or so we were trolling, when we sat in awkward silence. All he had to do was open it and hand me something to nosh on. But we couldn't move. Oh, no. It would scare the fish away, he reasoned. Wait a few minutes, and then we'll have a snack. A few minutes turned into two hours and being hungry just makes being miserable much worse.

I prayed for rain, because I knew he wore a toupee and when it rained it stained it, or ruined it or something and then we'd have to go home. But it never rained. And the fish never came.

A few minutes later he leaned over to his cooler, snapped it open and pulled out a couple pieces of beef jerky. He started talking about them, about the history of them and all sorts of other bullshit I didn't care about. He waved them around while he expounded. Did I know they're space food? Astronauts appreciate the fact they are lightweight and high in nutrition. He said the word "jerky" is actually a corruption of a Spanish term for "burnt meat." I started thinking how funny it was we recognize words that are "corrupted" and yet still use them every day, but at that point I was ready to snatch them out of his hands and push him overboard.

He handed me one carefully, like he was giving me a gold bar or something, and advised me to eat slowly. He said any food that has lots of protein has to be eaten slowly in order to get absorbed by the gastrointestinal tract. It sounded like more bullshit to me and I wolfed it down. He looked out towards the dock, at a blonde nymphet who straightened her towel in the breeze.

By mid-afternoon my mouth was dry and my groin was damp. Uncle Fritz looked worse for wear, too. He kept saying that all my talking scared the fish away, but I hadn't said shit since we got in the boat.

Things were looking good for a mutiny on the S.S. Slim Jim.

"You know, Adam." Uncle Fritz surveyed me. "You remind me a little of me."
"Oh?" I said.

"Yeah" he said. "A younger, lazier version of me."

"Thanks, Uncle Fritz, I think."

He nodded. "It's time you started shaping up." Uncle Fritz stood up and coiled his line in taut. "I *know* you're smoking. Don't even try to deny it."

Silence filled the boat.

"You've been smoking that shit and it's frying your brain. It's making you lazy and fat and stupid."

I adjusted my pole and glanced in the murky water.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

"Are you going to stop?"

"I only smoke every now and then," I shrugged. "It relaxes me."

"Oh," he chortled. "So you need to *relax*. I see. All that gangster rapping music stresses you out, huh?" Uncle Fritz's face turned red. "You stop smoking that shit, right now, today. Or else, so help me God—"

My pole curved and the reel squeaked.

"You think I'm bluffing?" He raised his voice. "Don't fucking test me, Adam."

He got up in my face, nearly tipping the boat over.

My line became stiff, but when I started he grasped my arm.

"It's just seaweed under the surface." He tightened his grip. "Don't worry about it. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"It's none of your business, really, what I do, it's not your—"

Uncle Fritz sighed and sat back down. He died of an overdose."

"What?"

"On my fortieth birthday."

"Who? Griffin?"

"No, my *other* brother." He growled, "Yes, Griffin."

"He died in a car accident. Didn't he? That's what—"

"No." He said. "Wrong again."

"Mom said a drunk driver hit him."

"Drunk driver" he shook his head solemnly. "Jesus—is that what she told you?"

"This week he would've turned sixty. And *you* know I can't talk to my sons—your cousins—about this. You know how lazy and full of excuses they are. God damn moochers," he crumpled up a piece of tin foil and tossed it in the tackle box.

"So pardon me if I'm lecturing you, but I want you to listen to me when I say—"

"But pot's different." I testified. "You can't *die* from it, Uncle Fritz."

"You're right. Instead you just end up brain dead."

I snorted.

“It’s true,” he said. “You’re still breathing, eating, pissing, and shitting, but all the higher level stuff—all the creative and important stuff—that’s squashed.”

Uncle Fritz he examined a scab on his arm with a grimace, “Look, I’m not going to give you a biochemical breakdown of the compounds in marijuana.”

“No?” I said. “That’s a bummer.”

“No. Because it’s academic and over your head.” He detached a lead sinker from his rod and placed it carefully starboard then belched. “You’ve scared away the fish and ruined my morning.”

Damp, deep sweat stains blotted his Polo shirt. He had lots of hair on his arms but none on his freckled legs—making him look older, uglier. I wished I could run away. The top of my feet were bright red, and I wondered if Uncle Fritz would let me have a beer with dinner, like he did last August when I caught two lake trout. This summer had been hazy, neck-burning weather; all I wanted was air-conditioning and a carbonated beverage. But out there, out on the boat with my uncle, wants and wishes shriveled up and died. Uncle Fritz didn’t want to hear about your dreams or your desires. He always said I wasted time with those. And in his book, nothing was worse than waste.

It must’ve have been the preservatives in the meat, or maybe a minor case of heat stroke, but that afternoon I started to realize how the whole of his personality was just the sum of a bunch of contradictions. How we’re all in that boat, really. How he was molded by the many convolutions of triumphs and disappointments in his life. The time his older son got caught drunk driving and it was in the local paper. Or the time Uncle Fritz was featured in *The New York Times* when he helped start a new burn unit in Boston. When Benny, his beloved beagle, got leukemia. And how the death of Griffin must have been the grand betrayal for him, convincing him that he was on his own in this world. But even though I started to understand him—perhaps just one side of the Mobius strip that was my uncle—I still didn’t like the guy.

“I’m not sure why you even invited me out here.” I said. “You don’t seem to—”

“I wanted to *try* to talk some sense into you.” He sighed. “I think your whole generation is a bunch of whiny blowhards.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s true. Twittering about what your morning dump looked like. Going on the Facebook and liking the newest bullshit liberal cause. You’re neurotic malcontents.” He waved his hand dismissively. “All of you.”

“That’s nice, Uncle Fritz.”

“What the hell do you want from me? You guys criticize *my* generation all the time. Oh, don’t look at me that way, Adam. It’s true—you do. *We* built the Hoover Dam and destroyed the Nazis. The hell have you guys done lately?”

I shrugged.

“Exactly,” he said

“Yeah,” I said, “but you guys also gave us global warming and—”

“Oh, fuck global warming,” he spat. “We got four feet of snow during a storm last February. What the hell was up with that? Where was the warming when I needed it?”

“Having a bad snowstorm doesn’t mean—”

“You’re out of you depth, Adam.” He testified. “Don’t talk science with me.”

I started to say something but he cut me off.

“People behave in patterns, Adam. You’re too young to see that now, but when you get older it’ll all make sense. The longer you do something, the harder it is to try something else. To think differently.”

I looked away from him, over to the girls’ legs splayed on their thick towels.

“I want to see you use your brain. Got it?”

I tossed my lure into the box and snatched another piece of burnt meat. It was salty, leathery and delicious. My uncle let out a groan and shook his head. I leaned back and swallowed slowly, loudly. The joint I smoked in the woods earlier that morning gave me a sinister cottonmouth, and by now the cool lake water looked quenching. Uncle Fritz reeled in his line and quickly removed the lure. Dark clouds blotted the sky.

“So,” he said. “What did we learn today?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know, *ixnay* on the gangster rapping, I guess.”

He shook his head and breathed another heavy sigh. The gaggle of girls donned their jean shorts, climbed into a silver Jeep and rolled away; another group of women I’d never meet.

“Let’s head back to shore.” Uncle Fritz ordered. “The Red Sox are on and I need a beer.”

The engine started with a shudder. I leaned the rudder towards the yellow row of cottages and tried to forget what he had told me.

A light rain had started to fall and the mosquitoes were out.

Aaron Sommers' stories have been featured in Confluence: The Journal of Graduate Liberal Studies, Lifelines: The Dartmouth Medical School Literary Journal and The Emerson Review. He has earned a B.A. and M.A.L.S. and M.Ed. from the University of New Hampshire, where he currently studies the work of J.D. Salinger