

# Chapter 1 of *Remembering Will*

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## 1) FlatFish

*Long ago, far away, life was clear, close your eyes* was the opening line to Remember, the haunting ballad by Harry Nilsson. The song was melancholy sweet and it did haunt Will Gailey as he listened to it on Spotify; but listen he must because he loved the song and he remembered all the things that once were and never would be again. The memories of some of those people, places, and things burned in the backroom of his heart like a fire in an ash can ignited by an unattended candle that toppled-over from the desk where all his dreams, whims, and inclinations were brought to bear before being discarded. And now, the crumpled paper of seasons past gave fuel to the flame that could engulf the Balsawood beams of his soul if water was not quickly applied. But, to burrow a firefighter's term, it was a "controlled burn" and the things that would never be again would have to be allowed to be incinerated before the flame was doused. Those things were as much weeds as memories and they would have to be burned so the seeds of a new season could be planted on the fertile soil underneath. Yes, it was time for a new season if Will would only let it grow; if only he would stand back and let the purifying and refreshing spring rain fall on the seeded rows. And this new season would only come if he would listen to the gentle rain in his spirit and not the raucous, tormenting voices in his ears and mind.

Oh, what could come if he would simply learn to listen to the white noise of the rain. Such peace could come if he would summons the courage to speak authoritatively, "SHUT UP HEAD!"

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Not so long ago and not that far away, life wasn't all that clear and Will wouldn't dare close his green eyes that were the hue of a freshly-cut lawn. In the sleepy hamlet of Warners, he stood on the angled bank of the abandoned Erie Canal in the loose gravel that spilled down from the walking and biking trail that had served as the towpath along New York's historic waterway a century before. Indeed his eyes were open, but his attention wandered as he cast a white eighth-ounce spinnerbait. The lure was intended to land inches from the opposite bank and into the mouth of a brook that helped to feed the canal after gurgling from one of seven ponds located on the Underwood property that bordered Canal Road on the north and the erstwhile "Clinton's Ditch" on the south. As his head was busy sorting his rambling, festering thoughts he applied a tad too much mustard and too little finesse to his cast. The bait landed in the overhanging branches of a willow that provided shade from the summer sun to the fish that could be lurking in the shallow water below its leafy shroud.

His mind was like a kitchen sink filled with dirty dishes that provided a gourmet meal to twenty-three ravenous cockroaches. As the spinnerbait settled into the lush green of the willow, its lithe branches served as fingers that lifted the switch that turned on the kitchen's ceiling light. As the cockroaches scurried for the darker recesses of Will's thoughts, his frustration over the errant cast manifested itself in a quiet yet expletive-laced tirade.

In his mind the frustration took the form of a heavy-set maid named Jereen, who shouted "what up with this stanky jank!?" as she smashed the last remaining roach with her ham hock of a right fist as it was too slow in beating a retreat across the linoleum counter top. Instantly, the sink in Will's mind was filled with Palmolive detergent suds as the maid hurriedly washed the dishes while muttering that he was a "dang cockamamie fool." Once being proclaimed that fool, Will's head cleared and he was able to focus on the snagged lure.

As he yanked on the black fiberglass rod, the open-face spinning reel's drag screeched in protest as the overstretched 8 pound test monofilament line twanged like a guitar string being tuned. A cluster of the willow's green branches was forced to bend to Will's efforts as he pulled, but they wouldn't break free nor would they release the spinnerbait. It was though the lure was an engagement ring and he was the soon to be husband who tried to pull it off of his fiancé's finger; having gotten cold feet over the pending marriage. With cautious deliberation, he stepped sideways up the slippery bank while keeping tight pressure on the line as the worn soles of his tan Timberland work boots struggled to take purchase in the gravel. Birds chirped happily as he whipped the rod from side to side with a whooshing sound; and to his ears it was though they were laughing and enjoying the comedic performance in which he was the star against his own wishes.

"Come on, dammit" he muttered through gritted teeth as the screeching drag and twanging line performed a most dissonant and tone-challenged song; sounding like his first band Rolodex Cough Drop as they practiced in September of 1985 on the enclosed sun porch of the vintage colonial house where he grew up in Warners. Will was an unskilled singer and guitarist at that time but his aspirations were sky high. Now, his truest aspiration was to get the spinnerbait free of the selfish and taunting willow.

Twang - screech - snap; those three sounds preceded the "plop" as the line broke and the fingers of the willow opened and dropped their prized possession into the murky canal. Will didn't hear the plop but he saw the spinnerbait fall as he landed hard on his butt and slid down the bank where his forward motion only ceased once his boots were halfway submerged in the water.

Pain was a bullet train speeding along the rails of his spine after leaving Tailbone Station and arriving early at the transportation hub in the city of Shoulder Blade. Wincing in what would be temporary physical agony, he hoarsely shouted a synonym for feces that was once among George Carlin's seven words that couldn't be said on television. He dropped his fishing rod, swung his feet out of the water, and then used his hands as supports before first squatting and then standing upright.

Two parts of Will were now moist; his feet and his eyes. He wasn't a crybaby at thirty-nine years of age, but his frustration bubbled like the babbling brook the spilled through the opposite bank that was blurry in his sight. "That's the third one of those I've lost this year" he growled, but as far as he could tell no one was there to hear his lament. The exasperation was cumulative and fishing was supposed to get his mind off of things, but it seemed that even his favorite hobby was not a safe harbor from the torments of his day

to day existence. But the canal and fishing was his only escape from the torments, so he had to make the most of it. He shrugged off this latest setback, picked up his rod, and reeled in the line sans spinnerbait until there were three or so feet hanging from the eyelet at the tip. As the line floated diagonally on a light breeze that helped to dispel the growing late morning heat, he sloshed in his soaked boots the seven feet to his left where his grey plastic tackle box was open and waiting.

He squatted down and released an “ah” as it helped to relieve the pain of his fall and slide. From the top tray of the box he retrieved a gold-colored snap-swivel and with quick and efficient skill tied on the piece of tackle with a fisherman’s clinch knot. After trimming the excess line with a tiny set of shears that were part of a pocket-sized utility knife, he stared at his decreasing arsenal of lures before deciding on a whim that the old X4 model FlatFish painted orange with black spots would be the next called up to duty. The wiggling, shallow-running plastic plug would often catch more of the canal’s Coontail and Cabomba weeds than fish. Still, the lure worked effectively as a fish enticer in those rare instances when the two sets of treble hooks wouldn’t gather strands of the overly-abundant aquatic plant life that Will referred to as “gletch.”

“Not the best thing to toss into this weedy ditch but what the heck, why not” he mumbled to seemingly no one as he clipped the FlatFish onto the snap-swivel. Then, holding the butt of the rod in his right hand he reached his left under his grey t-shirt bearing the iconic Fender guitar logo screen-printed in black across the chest. Rubbing the ache in his narrow yet muscular lower back he watched in awe as a Great Blue Heron winged majestically just feet above the water from west to east before ascending and disappearing over the trees that lined the north bank.

“Man, herons are beautiful birds” he thought to himself as he squinted in an effort to catch a final glimpse before declaring with throaty infuriation “not like these stupid deer flies... ah!” His hand streaked from his back as a de facto flyswatter and smacked his left ear, missing the bothersome insect that had begun orbiting his head. As his ear rang like the tone used in an Emergency Broadcast System announcement, he then felt the sting of the fly on his scalp; the pest’s proboscis having worked its way through the close-cropped brown hair that had thus far been spared the curse of the premature thinning suffered by the uncles on his mother’s side. A centimeter from the fly there was a goose egg that had been acquired the day before through hard contact with the upper driver’s side doorway of his blue Kia Sportage as he hurriedly and absent-mindedly climbed in. His left hand smacked down on the bump and in reaction to the searing pain he bellowed another of Carlin’s seven words; that which was used to describe the act of sexual intercourse. As his eyes watered again, the dead deer fly fell and with a dimple landed in his open thermos of coffee.

“I wish I never got out of bed today” he fumed as it felt like a grass fire burned on his scalp. After wiping the left sleeve of the t-shirt across his eyes, the desire to get something good from this fishing outing returned in spite of the pain that engulfed his head. He blinked rapidly to clear his eyes and drew a deep breath through his nose. The sweet aroma of the nearby lilies was pleasing to his olfactory glands and it helped clear the lightheadedness that was a byproduct of the rude awakening of the sleeping nob on his noggin. Then, in rapid and nearly mindless motion the bail of his reel was opened with his right hand, and with a flick of his wrist the FlatFish was flipped toward the mouth of the brook. As the lure took flight, the gentle breeze that had blown intermittently throughout the morning presented itself with a touch more gusto, and having not been compensated for carried the arcing line into the jilted willow.

Another balloon of Will's exasperation popped as he shouted the curse that referred to the male offspring of a female dog. The setbacks from day to day life had exhausted his limited patience and he couldn't afford to replace another expensive fishing lure. His back ached from the jarring slide down the bank, and his scalp smarted from the fly bite and the slap on the goose egg. His boots were waterlogged, making his feet uncomfortably wet. Apoplectically he whipped the rod back, and the result was not what was expected. The spinnerbait by design was virtually snag-proof and should have pulled free from the tree but didn't. The FlatFish with its two treble hooks should have become the possession of the willow but instead jerked loose, and remaining attached to the line landed on the water's surface with a faint plunk near the mouth of the brook.

There was a violent splash; the rod bent double, and the reel's drag screeched. Will was caught completely by surprise but became immediately focused as he snapped the rod back and set the hooks. "Holy mother of pearl!" he exclaimed with delight as the large fish pulled left and then shot toward a bed of Coontail in the center of the canal.

He kept the rod in the twelve o'clock position as the fish seemed content to take refuge in the weeds. The line again twanged like a guitar string and the reel's drag made an intermittent scraping sound as the fish shook its head in an effort to liberate itself from the deceptive piece of plastic that it might have thought was an injured sunfish and an easy meal. "Oh man, this beast is huge!" he whispered as he pulled the rod slowly back to one o'clock, hoping the pressure would force the leviathan to move and break the stalemate. His right hand was clenched around the foot of the reel while to the contrary his left thumb, index, and middle fingers held loosely to its handle. He steadfastly maintained pressure but didn't turn the handle as the combined weight of the fish and weeds would surely break the line if patience wasn't exercised.

Every shake of the fish's head was felt in his right shoulder and was made audible through the quick creaks and scratches of the drag. Will then turned the reel's handle ever so slightly and the finny beast moved a foot or so toward the angler. "He can't fight much being stuck in the thick gletch" he muttered to himself before turning the handle several more cranks and then pulling the rod back again as the drag continued to complain. The fish continued to shake its head but seemed ready to surrender as Will reeled and then deliberately pumped the rod, pulling his weighty quarry slowly toward him. Although the canal was only three feet deep in this spot, he couldn't see the fish through the muddy water.

After several more sets of handle turns and rod pumps the fish was coming nearer to the bank. The line wiggled quickly left to right as the critter shook his head but otherwise it appeared prematurely ready to throw in the towel. The fish felt like dead weight as he pulled it closer, and Will prepared himself to land his catch while a deriding voice in his head that sounded much like his own chastised him, carping "you're so stupid to forget your net, but would we expect anything less of an idiot like you?"

"Shut the hell up, I'm not an idiot!" our fisherman snapped back in a low voice as he was focused on getting what could be the fish of a lifetime in toward the bank. After another set of handle turns and rod pumps the fish was three feet from the shore and turned on its side. "Holy sh..." Will started to exclaim as he finally saw the size of it, but before he could finish his proclamation he was startled by a man's voice coming from the trail at the top of the bank behind him.

“Wow! That’s a huge fish” the man offered, seemingly more excited than Will. Being thrust out of his soundproof room of concentration, Will snapped around toward the man and as he did there was another violent splash and the reinvigorated fish streaked back toward the weeds. “Dammit!” the fisherman yelled as he held tight to the rod as the drag again screamed in dissent. He held the rod high but didn’t reel as this time the fish sped through the Coontail, sending small pieces of the aquatic fauna flying above the surface of the water as the line sliced through it like a WeedWacker.

The fallen remains of a dead birch reached out into the canal from the opposite bank and to the left, and as the fish stripped line from the buzzing reel it cleared the weed bed and headed for the tree. Will pulled the throbbing rod back to the two o’clock position while his hand on the reel’s handle looked like a VHS tape on fast-forward. He knew that if the fish swam into the birch’s submerged branches it would be able to use them to tear free. In desperation, he horsed the big fish to keep it away from the fallen tree.

Crank...crank...crank...crank...pump...crank...crank...snap!

The frantic reeling and pumping combined with the brutish thrusts of the fish caused the 8 pound monofilament line to break. Will was breathless from the physicality and the excitement of the battle, and the geyser of endorphins that had been spraying through his body abruptly ran dry. Suddenly, it felt as though his identity had been stolen and his birthday had been made null and void as he went from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows in mere minutes. It wouldn’t have mattered if his white American Standard Telecaster, his pre-CBS sunburst Strat, his Taylor acoustic and his Twin-Reverb amp had all caught fire in his apartment along with the inventory of N-scale trains that he sold through his website N-trax dot biz. Catching that fish would have made his summer and possibly even his life. Because of some old fool who startled and distracted him, the fish was gone and so was the thrill and all in all it sucked to be Will.

“Golly, that’s too bad. That was one heck of a nice pike! Goodness, I’ve never seen one that big!” the 72 year old fellow commiserated with a twinkle in his blue eyes and a smile on his craggy, weather-beaten face as he pushed up on the brim of his tattered straw farmer’s hat.

The rotting timbers of the crib dam that held back the reservoir of Will’s rage collapsed. He dropped his rod, clenched his fists, and dexterously ascended the bank as gravel flew from the soles of his work boots and hit the water with a splatter. Propelled by the strong legs that were the foundation of his taut 5’-10” frame, it took all of four seconds to reach the path. Red-faced and nearly hyperventilating he roared “what!? That’s all you can say is ‘too bad’!? I wouldn’t have lost that monster pike if you didn’t come along you wrinkled old freak!”

“Old freak? Well, gee whiz, judging by the touches of grey in your goatee you aren’t exactly a kid” the senior fellow replied congenially, still smiling but stepping back a few paces while holding his hands in a defensive position as Will stomped toward him with work boots sloshing.

“Hey (term for anus that isn’t G-rated), you’re gonna make this a personal issue!? Well, c’mon - you wanna piece of me!?” a winded Will taunted as he stood three feet away from the man with his arms extended, hands open, and fingers wiggling in an attempt to provoke.

“Well, goodness son - I don’t want to hurt you, and maybe if you didn’t drink a whole thermos of coffee you wouldn’t be so jacked up!” the senior fellow chortled as he backed up a few more paces until he was stopped abruptly by a cyclist warning “look out dude” as he whizzed past on a lime green ten speed.

“Why don’t you watch where the hell you’re going you pansy metro-sexual” Will turned and shouted at the rider as he peddled eastward, using the mocking term in reference to the tight blue spandex shorts and jersey ensemble that he wore.

“Those biking suits are kind of foo-foo, but I guess they’re aerodynamic and absorb sweat and I don’t see why you had to yell at the guy” the senior fellow stated as he stepped closer.

Will drove his right pointer finger into the left shoulder of the senior, near a dime-sized rip in the short-sleeved, faded red dress shirt that was missing the top two buttons. The older man was his equal in height and shared a similar thin yet muscular frame - save for a slight pot belly that Will had been able to fend off. Jabbing his finger a second time for emphasis, Will sneered “yeah, foo-foo, but I’m not in the mood to laugh! You made me lose my biggest fish ever because you couldn’t mind your own damn business and I’m pretty pissed-off!” With that, Will pushed hard on the senior’s shoulder which made his straw hat fall, revealing a bald top and ring of grey hair. Despite his easy-going and cheerful nature, the shove pained the older fellow’s shoulder and made him feel threatened when combined with the rage visible in Will’s eyes and mien. In a defensive reaction that overrode any forethought, the senior’s right fist connected with Will’s left cheek. The color left the younger man’s face - save for the point of impact - and his eyes grew wide as he staggered back three feet. In a feeble effort to remain upright, he spun his arms as if jumping rope before landing with a snap and crackle in the low brush that separated the canal and the path.

“I’m really sorry son, but I thought you might hurt me” the elder explained as he shook his head, the twinkle gone from his eyes and the brightness of his countenance extinguished.

Will’s cheek smarted and his head ached again; this time from the wallop and not the goose egg. Again his sight was blurred by moisture as he lay sprawled in the undergrowth, and again he blinked rapidly to clear his eyes and fight off tears. His pride was hurt more than his face as he’d been bested in this instance, but that was the very least of it. This day in June was supposed to be a day of celebration but instead it was miserable like so many lately.

With his vision clearing he watched the older man turn, bend down, and retrieve his hat. As the man turned back toward him with the well-worn straw topper held at his waist, Will noted the stains and small holes dotting his heavily-faded jeans. The red shirt was tucked in but he wore no belt. His white Nike sneakers weren’t really white anymore and the left one had a strap of grey duct tape wrapped around the toe. In spite of his spirited appearance the older man could have been impoverished or even homeless, but that was “his problem” Will thought to himself as he rubbed his stinging cheek.

The birds sang happily, bugs buzzed, fish splashed, and the sun shined brilliantly on a beautiful morning approaching noon with temperatures in the low 70’s. As Will prepared to push himself out of the brush that was now poking his back like sharpened pencil points, the older man spoke somberly “there’s lots of fish to catch and I’ve some some fishing to do myself. I pray son, that you’ll forgive me and find your way.”

Will didn't respond as the man walked spritely away along the path toward the west. "I resent that condescending jerk referring to me as 'son' because I'm thirty-nine damn years old" he bristled in his mind as he climbed out of the brush and then picked nettles out of the legs of his jeans. "If I see that cretinous Hee-Haw reject again I'll cold-cock him back into the haystack with Junior Samples" he mumbled as he gingerly side-stepped down the bank to gather his fishing tackle and thermos.

"Ah, at least my coffee is still warm" he whispered to no one as he poured the last bit from the bottle into the accompanying plastic cup. The smell of the brew was more pleasing than the lilies, and for a moment it pushed his vexation and torment back with the cockroaches in the deepest, darkest recesses of his mind. He stared for a moment at the brook that spilled in directly across from him, and then further to the left where the fallen carcass of the birch had become a resting place for a turtle that sunned itself on a branch that was even with the water's surface.

"What a crappy day but at least there's coffee" was the comforting thought as he tipped the cup to his lips before spotting the dead deer fly floating on the brown liquid.