

Can a Corn
by Jess Walter

Ken took dialysis Tuesdays and Thursdays. It fell to Tommy after his mom passed to check his stepdad out of the Pine Lodge Correctional Facility. Drop him at the hospital. Take him back three hours later.

Ken groaned as he climbed up the truck. —Whatcha got there, Tom ?

Tommy looked over the backseat. —Pole and tackle.

—You goin' fishin' this weekend?

—I ain't skydivin'.

Ken stared out his window. —You stop me by a store?

There was a downtown grocery sold Lotto, fortified wines, and forties. Ken hopped out. Tommy spun radio stations till Ken come back with a can a corn.

—Oh, no you ain't, Ken

.—So got-damn tired, Tom. Can't sit on that blood machine today.

—You'd rather die?

—I'd rather fish.

—No way, Ken.

He drove toward Sacred Heart. But when Tommy stopped at a red light Ken reached back, got the pole and jumped out. Fine, Tommy thought. Die. I don't care. The old man walked toward the Spokane River. Tommy pulled up next to him, reached over and rolled down the passenger window.

—Get in the damn truck, Ken.

Ken ignored him.

—That pole ain't even geared.

Ken walked, facing away.

Tommy drove alongside for another block. —Get in the truck, Ken.

Ken turned down a one-way. Tommy couldn't follow.

Fine. Stupid bastard. Tommy went back to work, but the only thing in the pit was a brake job on some old lady's Mercury: four hundred in repairs on a shit-bucket worth three. Pissed, Tommy gave the Mercury to Todd and drove back downtown.

He parked, got his tackle box from the truck and walked back along the river. Found his stepfather under a bridge, dry pole next to him.

Tommy gave him hook and weight.

Ken's gray fingers shook.

—Give it here. Tommy weighted and hooked the line. He pulled a can opener from the tackle box and opened Ken's corn. Carefully, Tommy pushed the steel hook into the corn's paper skin until, with a tiny spurt, it gave way.

He handed the old man back the pole. Ken cast it.

Half-hour later, Ken reeled in a dull catfish, yellow-eyed and spiny. No fight in the thing at all. Almost like it didn't mind.

Ken held it up. —Well I will be got-damned.

Tommy released the fish. It just kind of sank.

He dropped the old man at the front gate of the prison, his breathing already shallow. Rusty. He was so weak Tommy had to reach over and pop his door.

—Hey that wadn't a bad got-damn fish. All things considered. His eyes were filming over already. —We should go again Tuesday.

—We gonna start playin' catch now, too? Tommy asked.

Ken laughed. —I doubt it.

Then Tommy watched the dying old man pass through the metal gate. The fucker.