Fish to Fry

Aimee Rochon
Any of us don’t want to know the truth about our family’s past. We tend to see the best in our family members; after all, if you don’t have your family, who do you have? I like to imagine my family like a river, somewhat like Noah Adams did in his memoir, *Far Appalachia*. While in search of his family history and stories, Adams takes the reader on a journey through his home region and on the New River. His family history feels like a secret, something mysterious and slightly out of reach, lingering in the water of the river, waiting to be discovered. Like Adams’ river, the surface of my family’s river is deceptive. From the banks, our river looks clean and calm, unaffected and preserved. Yet step inside and let the water run over you and you will notice the chaos that lives just underneath the surface of our reflective and shimmering exterior.

Yes, our river is raging underneath, forcing its way through a cold mountain valley, half frozen, half melted, each sheet of ice a family chapter, broken off and released from the main story. I like to think of my family members as the rocks below the river’s surface. Sometimes they break beyond the water line and sometimes they don’t. These rocks guide my journey, create little dips and bumps along my path; guide me as I flow past, affecting me both momentarily and ultimately. What I do not realize yet is that these rocks and sheets of ice will always be with me, because they too, are a part of me, a part of our river.

Just like the river, my family has secrets. We have stories that we don’t like to talk about. These secret stories are the fish that swim far below the surface, popping up, if only for a moment, before plunging back to the safety of the dark water. Like the fish that needs water, these stories need keepers. As I get older I realize that I have never been a keeper, have never seen below the surface of my family’s river. But I hear these stories now; my family does not withhold them any longer. I am becoming a keeper, one small secret at a time.

But I don’t want to hear stories from Mom about Dad’s plans to kidnap my sister and me when we were babies. I don’t want to hear how he was going to take us to Canada with some lady named Cathy. I don’t want to find pictures of...
her in our family photo albums. I don’t want to know that she spent every Christmas with my family and that my Nana treated her like a daughter, yet she still tried to take us away from our family when we were just babies. I don’t want to find pictures of her reaching out to me, a two-year old, and the look of pain and sadness on my small, chubby face. I don’t want to think that my family was being deceived, when they were just trying to help her out. And I don’t want to see the serious reaction on Nana’s face when Mom tells me about the failed kidnapping heist, when I look to her for a bit of sanity, begging her with my eyes to signal this is not true, like my Mom is crazy and making all this up. But Nana always did like her fish kept deep down in our river. I don’t want to hear my sister say that she already knew this and that was why she went to counseling a few years ago. I guess her fish are rising to the surface of our river too. I want to be a releaser. I don’t want to be a keeper. I don’t want Mom to laugh when I ask how they foiled the plan of the kidnapping, saying casually, “Well, we just didn’t let them in the house.” I don’t want to hear myself laugh in reaction to this crazy story. I don’t want to feel myself rationalizing that Dad must have really loved us if he wanted to take us away, because in reality, I’m sure it was just for ransom money, to use to buy more booze, his first true love.

“Secrets are things we give to others to keep for us.”
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Dad loved drinking so much that for a long time, we never got to see him. I never minded though, I was always a Momma’s girl. Eventually there came a time again when Missie and I were allowed to see Dad. You see, Dad had exchanged the addiction of alcohol for the addiction of Alcoholics Anonymous. No longer did we see him with a beer bottle in his hand. Now he was all about getting those little medallions, a small token of his sobriety. The best part of Dad’s sobriety was the AA dances he took us to every other Saturday night. We liked getting dressed up and seeing all our new friends there. Missie and I learned to love these dances, along with all the other sons and daughters of alcoholics, even if the rooms were smoky and our eyes burned. Besides, they had lots of junk food at these parties, so we just bashed in all the free orange soda we could drink out of those short, white, Styrofoam cups, our names carved into the sides with a fingernail. The music was fun so we danced, we laughed, and we played. We seemed to get comfort out of this routine: the songs, the kids, and the smoky rooms never changed. We were seven and eight and this was our custom. It’s just like girl scouts or CCD I told myself, except we never lasted so long there, and instead of friendship badges and first communion, we got orange soda and chocolate covered donuts, fleeting moments of sugar rushes and break-dancing. I’d rather remember those dances than hear the stories of Dad taking Missie and me to a bar with him, only we had to stay in the car because we weren’t twenty-one. No, we were just two and one. But people tell me these stories now that I am a grownup. They want me to be a keeper for them. But I certainly don’t want to hear how Dad pushed Mom down a flight of stairs while she was holding me, an infant, in her arms.


“The first river you paddle runs through the rest of your life. It bubbles up in pools and eddies to remind you who you are.”—Lynn Noel

Some will say, “You kids are so lucky that you were too young to remember those things.” But I never said that I wanted to be a keeper. I want to be a releaser. I want to take that slippery story, that mangled up mackerel and throw it back. Get rid of it, make it disappear. Like the friendly fisherman who throws his catch of the day back into the water, I too want nothing to do with the keeper’s chore. These fish are scarred. Each time they are caught and brought up to the surface they reveal a fresh wound. Just like Dad’s head. Opened up to fit room for a shunt that drains water from his brain. Yes, Dad literally has water on his brain. Maybe that is why he is so mad. You can practically see this tube running over the top of his balding head. I don’t even ask if it has anything to do with his bipolar diagnosis. I don’t want to know anymore. I don’t want hear the stories anymore. I don’t want to be a keeper. I hate to hear that Dad has jumped off a highway overpass or is harassing the cousins again. I don’t want to check my voicemail and hear him begging me for twenty dollars so he can buy cigarettes and coffee.

Like a fisherman with his hook and pole, I too, have tools on my side. I call them distance and denial. If I don’t answer his calls, then I don’t have to talk to him. I don’t have to deal with all his craziness, his pain pill addiction, and obsessive compulsive behavior. I use these tools frequently so I can just keep flowing right over these fish, these secret stories. I have places to go and sad secrets to ignore. But I understand now why everyone throws back the mackerel. No one wants to look at such an ugly fish. No one really wants to know the depths and complexities of their family secrets.

“Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known.”—A.A. Milne
I hated Mom for it. I hate that I remember thinking that Mom in her when she always took him back. I hated those times and that she was really taking us back to safety, back to Nana's house, remember that feeling of joy and satisfaction when I believed her and Mom said we were really leaving this time. I don't want to steak knife in my dresser drawer just in case. I don't want to caging my beautiful mother and clipping her wings.

Mom, make themselves feel better about their shortcomings by to be a family with us. They just wanted to dominate and control and her boyfriends, no matter what she said. They never wanted treated her. We were never a package deal when it came to Mom choose her boyfriend over her girls, no matter how terrible he that feeling that has stayed with me that Mom would always esteem, made her feel like she was nothing. I hate that memory, remember how rude he was to Mom, how he tore down her self even if that home wasn’t in her name and her kid’s bedrooms were unfinished.


I don’t want to remember when Mom dated Mark and they built a house in Plymouth. Missie and I were living with Nana, as always, and didn’t really want to leave the comfort and security of her home. At the same time, we wanted to live with our Mom like normal kids do, but not in Plymouth, not so far away from our friends, and certainly not the summer before eighth grade, the absolute worst time to move a kid. But Nana said we had to go and live with them. I don’t want to remember her saying: “Your mother has a house now . . . it’s time she had her girls.” I don’t want to find old pictures of my sister standing in her unfinished bedroom that was right across from my unfinished bedroom. Yes, we each had our own room, something we never had before, but we never imagined they would be like this. I don’t want to remember that we had no finished floors, no drywall, no heat, no nothing in our bedrooms. We had so many plans for those rooms. We liked to sit up late at night and talk about how we were going to decorate our rooms, what colors we would use, and what comforters we would have on our beds. We looked through catalogs and folded down pictures of rooms we liked. I remember wanting to put a window on the shared wall between Missie’s bedroom and my own. I figured it wouldn’t be so hard since the walls were still unfinished. And Mom always had a flair for interior design, so she would sit with us and suggest ideas for our rooms. I always liked her ideas, but I never got to see them in the physical world. They never amounted to anything. Just like her relationship with Mark.

I don’t want to remember that feeling of not being wanted or welcome. And I definitely don’t want to remember the sound of his voice as he yelled at us, red faced and angry about anything, and Mom’s voice as she made excuses for him. I don’t want to remember how rude he was to Mom, how he tore down her self esteem, made her feel like she was nothing. I hate that memory, that feeling that has stayed with me that Mom would always choose his boyfriend over her girls, no matter how terrible he treated her. We were never a package deal when it came to Mom and her boyfriends, no matter what she said. They never wanted to be a family with us. They just wanted to dominate and control Mom, make themselves feel better about their shortcomings by caging my beautiful mother and clipping her wings.

I don’t want to remember how tough I thought I was, a hidden steak knife in my dresser drawer just in case. I don’t want to remember how happy I was each time Mom and Mark fought and Mom said we were really leaving this time. I don’t want to remember that feeling of joy and satisfaction when I believed her that she was really taking us back to safety, back to Nana’s house, where we had tea parties and dinner every night at six. And I don’t want to remember that feeling of sheer and utter disappointment in her when she always took him back. I hated those times and I hated Mom for it. I hate that I remember thinking that Mom would endure anything if it meant she had a home of her own. Even if that home wasn’t in her name and her kid’s bedrooms were unfinished.

I don’t want to remember Mom’s winter rental on G Street in Hull when I was in the fifth grade. I don’t want to remember her friends that stayed with us and all their fighting and alcohol abuse. I don’t want to remember the time that the fighting got so bad that everything in the house was broken, huge mirrors shattered to pieces all over the living room floor, increasing our bad luck for another seven years. I don’t want to remember that feeling of embarrassment and shame when the soccer coach came by to drop off my trophy and saw all the wine bottles, with candlesticks in them that were strewn all over the front porch. Where clam shells filled with cigarette butts welcomed any visitors we may have had. I don’t want to remember that cottage and its bare refrigerator or the eyes growing on the potatoes on the bottom shelf of our otherwise empty pantry. I was always scared to open that door because each time I did, the eyes seemed to have grown longer and longer. They were so long that no one wanted to touch them anymore, even just to throw them away, to get rid of them. So there they sat, a big sack of potatoes and eyes, creeping slowly out of the dark pantry and into the light of the small kitchen. We had a box of crackers and cheese in there too. Those little, neat, pre-made sandwiches, but the cheese tasted so funny that we hated to eat them. But it was that or the potatoes, so we ate, small fingers pinching small noses.

That sack of potatoes and box of crackers were everything we didn’t want to see, feel, and taste. Everything we tried to hide from ourselves and each other; but no matter what we did, how we tried to close the door and cover them up, they remained there, staring us in the face, reminding us that our secrets never leave us, and that our shame is always just an overgrown produce item away. How long they sat there at the bottom, just like the fish when sleeping. Even when you don’t see them, you know they are still there, breathing and growing, waiting for that next moment to pop out of the water or spill out of their sack and onto the floor of the pantry.

I don’t want to remember that summer when Nana got into a fight with Mom. We were living with Nana at the time, but not for much longer. It seems like we were always in and out of Nana’s house in Braintree. It was August 23, 1987. My tenth birthday. Nana yelled. Mom stormed out. I was sitting on Nana’s front, concrete steps, small fingers pinching small noses.

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of vulnerability. Of having no idea what was about to happen and knowing that I had no control. It was my birthday. Didn’t they care? Couldn’t this have waited until tomorrow? I remember hoping that Mom would take me with her. I wanted to be on her team. If she was mad at Nana then so was I. I remember wanting to convey that sense of teamwork and support to her, but I was too young, and didn’t know how. Mom finally did take me with her that day she left, the day we left. I remember feeling that she and I were against the world. I remember being strong for Mom because she just didn’t have it in her anymore. I remember Mom apologizing to me for not being a better mom, for not having a home for Missie and I. She was crying but I wasn’t. I had to show her that I was tough. We could make it on our own, just her, me, and Missie. She said that we were going to be a real family, just us three. No boyfriends, no Grandparents, just us three girls. The way it was supposed to be.

But instead, Mom took me to see my Uncle Paul and Auntie Johanna who were camping on Curlew Pond in Plymouth for the weekend. They had a present for me in their tent, a Bon Jovi poster rolled up and hiding inside a sleeping bag. We stayed long enough for the fight between Mom and Nana to blow over. Long enough for me to fantasize that all those things Mom told me were really going to happen, like being a family together and having a place of our own, with no boyfriends to ruin our fun, and no Grandparents to tell us what to do. But she eventually took me back to Nana’s and carried on with the rest of her life. I don’t want to remember that feeling of being so happy, so high with the thought of having my childhood dreams come true, and then having them crash and burn just after my tenth birthday. Yes, before I knew it, I was back on those stairs, tracing the iron railing with my fingers, like nothing had even happened. Like no promises had ever been made.

I realize now that I must be a keeper and not a releaser. I must catch these secret stories, these sneaky little fish and let the breath run out of them. I need to fry these fish, grill their guts out. Finally boil those glaring potatoes and mash them up good. These fish need to feel the pain that I feel, the stab of the hook and the heat of the grill. Then our river will be clear. Then my nieces and nephews, my future children and grandchildren can swim in our river without the fear of a slimy fish nipping at their ankles and toes.

I realize that these memories and secrets of my family will never really go anywhere. They remain here with me, as they are with my sister, mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather. Instead of recalling these sad stories, I would rather remember the three-legged races in my Nana’s front yard on my seventh birthday, my purple and white striped shirt that matched the colors on my Snoopy cake that Mom baked and decorated just for me. I’d rather reminisce about finding sand dollars on the beach while camping, learning how to shuffle cards the grown up way, or the sweet dreams I had while sleeping in my real bedroom at Nana’s, the one with carpet and curtains. Maybe knowing the truth will make me stronger. Maybe not. But this is my family and these are our stories. That will never change. Our river will keep on flowing.

“The river has taught me to listen; you will learn from it, too. The river knows everything; one can learn everything from it. You have already learned from the river that it is good to strive downwards, to sink, to seek the depths.”—Herman Hesse

“Rivers represent constant rebirth. The water flows in, forever new, yet forever the same; they complete a journey from beginning to end, and then they embark on the journey again.”—Tim Palmer