

The Muck Bond

BY NORMAN THOMAS HOOD

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I was eight years old the morning I died. Eight years and one day, to be precise. I probably still had cake in my stomach, as it hadn't even been sixteen hours since I'd blown out my candles. *Happy 8th 'Birtday', Christy!* was written in icing.

"Those hillbilly bakers!" Mom said, putting the cake in the back of our van. "How the hell does someone working in a bakery misspell *Birthday*?"

She fumed the entire drive home. As soon as she got into the house, she cut a small 'h' out of pink wrapping paper, carefully separated 'Birt-' from '-day' and placed the 'h' between them. When my dad saw it, he laughed so hard he started coughing.

"Score another win for the Grammar-Nazi," he said, trying to get his breath.

I wasn't sure if he was teasing, or meant it as a mean jab. Looking back to how they spoke to each another, I believe *'frequent use of sarcasm'* was written into their wedding vows.

My twelve year-old brother chimed in about the misspelled icing.

"They forgot the Anti-!" he laughed. Yes, that was Brad's nickname for me, 'The Anti-Christy'. That's what you get when your brother's Sunday school class obsesses over the *end times* from the Bible; and for being Southern Baptist, I guess. Oddly though, going to church never seemed to improve how he treated me.

Everyone in the family jokes about how mad Brad was after my mom told him she was pregnant with me. No more 'baby of the family' treatment for him, he feared, and he was right. He got all of Daddy's whoopings and I got none of them.

All I had to do was look my dad in the eyes and quiver my bottom lip a little. I'd get a five-minute time out instead of corporal punishment. Maybe that's why Brad flicked my bling-ring into the lake the day after my birthday: payback!

The best things about having a July birthday are: it's usually warm outside, and always occurs during Summer break from school. Brad's birthday is December 28th, so he gets short-changed every year, getting one or two of his Christmas gifts re-marked as *Happy Birthday!*

My big day was certainly different that year. Mom and dad decided we'd all visit our grandparents in Clermont, Florida for a week. With no A/C in Dad's Chevy, it was a roasting, eight-hour journey from our home in Georgia.

I remember how boring the last few hours of the drive were. Florida is *way* too flat. The scenery never changes. The highway drive put everyone in the car to sleep, including Dad, who was driving!

Memaw and Papa visited us in Georgia a couple times, but I was only four years old the last time we drove to their house. All I remember from that trip was their dog, the lake and the non-stop bullying from Brad. Early into this drive, I was informed their cocker spaniel died the year before. They wanted to make sure I knew that before running through Mema's house, calling his name.

When we pulled into their driveway, we saw eight shiny birthday balloons tied to their mailbox! Big pink ones... because I'm a girl, of course. I never could stand the color pink! Reminds me of the "dismal-bismol" mom made me drink every time my stomach hurt. I would have preferred red or blue balloons if anyone had asked, but I was happy they made an effort.

When we passed the mailbox, I turned to Brad with a contemptuous smile, just to taunt him. It worked. After Dad parked the car, we peeled ourselves off the vinyl seats and grabbed a bag or suitcase to carry inside.

Dad had barely knocked on their door when it suddenly sprung open, revealing a much older Papa than I'd remembered.

"Well, *there's* my sweet family! We thought you'd be here over an hour ago!" Papa said while mean-mugging my dad. "We were starting to get worried."

"Oh, don't blame *me*, Pop. I'm not the one with the squirrel bladder. That was this one, here," he said, pointing at Mom. My brother and I instantly looked at her, who donned a tired and disingenuous smile. It seemed every half hour of the drive they were arguing over whether or not to take the next exit.

“Well, Doug... you *did* decide to marry a woman, remember? And I’ve had two children,” she said. “If you wanted someone to hold it longer, you should have married one of your golfing buddies. You’ve *certainly* spent enough time with them to have earned a diamond ring by now.”

Score one for mom! And the battle was on, only now, in the Sunshine State.

Papa and Memaw’s house looked different than I remembered, and much smaller. But again, I was only four when I last saw it. The outside was covered in pink stucco. I’d forgotten that.

Eww! Pink... everywhere. I thought, walking past the front bushes.

We carried our luggage in and were shown which rooms to take. The last time I was there, I was small enough to sleep with mom and dad, so Brad got his own room. This time the ‘Birthday Girl’ got the third bedroom and Brad was shown the couch. He was thoroughly pissed! Score one more for the Anti-Christy! Add that to the balloons on their mailbox, and I understand now why my brother was such an ass to me that day.

After a big dinner, everyone grabbed a camping chair and took to the backyard for a campfire. Papa loved his fires. You’d have to sit far away in the beginning, though, because you never knew what he’d pour on the wood to get it burning. It could be rubbing alcohol or even gasoline. He considered anything he had lying around to be campfire fuel.

Four years ago, Papa dumped a whole jug of used lawnmower oil on the wood to get it going. The smoke was so black and putrid that my mom actually threw up on her shoes before dragging us back to the house. She tells the story frequently, always ending it by asking everyone the same question:

“*Why the hell would anyone want to save used lawn mower oil?*” As if we had an answer.

“So, Doug, what plans do you two have after dropping these two little buggers off?”

Huh? What’s he talking about? I wondered. *Dropping us off?* Brad looked just as confused as I was. Mom nervously broke in to explain.

“Kids, your father and I are leaving for the Keys in a couple days. We’ve never really *had* a real honeymoon, so we decided to take a few days... just for ourselves. Isn’t that nice? You two are staying with Papa and Memaw while we’re gone.”

“What’s the Keys?” I asked, still confused.

“It’s at the bottom of Florida, dumbass!” Brad said, scowling. “Vacationers go there to make babies. They’re going to make one to replace you.”

“Bradley! Don’t talk to your sister like that,” Dad scolded, “Not on her birthday!”

Mom gave Dad one of her infamous ‘what the hell?’ looks before trying to salvage the conversation.

“No one’s making any babies, Brad! It’s just that things have been pretty hectic lately, and your father and I need some alone time... just the two of us. We’ll be back before the weekend, then we’ll all drive home together.”

Brad’s expression didn’t change.

“Turn that frown upside down, mister,” Papa told him. “We’re going to have a great time together... you wait and see. Fishing, campfires, and tonight? Chocolate birthday cake!”

Brad threw a piece of kindling he’d been playing with into the fire. “Great... so I’m stuck with the Anti-Christy for a whole week?”

“Brad, you’d be stuck with her whether we were here or not. Well, you know what I mean... stuck with each other,” Dad explained.

“Like it’s going to be fun for *me*?” I said to Brad. “Dodging your rotten farts and watching you scratch your butt crack all week?”

“Look kids, you’re *both* going to have a good time,” Dad said. “Papa has a fishing boat, and, by the way... you don’t go out on it without him. That lake is dangerous! Plus, they bought some new board games for you all to play together at night.”

He eyeballed Brad when he mentioned the board games to let him know any further lip would cost him. Brad understood the look.

“Yes sir,” Brad said under his breath, still frowning.

That was my cue to go for his throat. “Sounds like lots of fun, Daddy!” I said, smiling as broadly as I could. “This way we have Memaw and Papa all to ourselves!” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Brad gritting his teeth. You’d think they were going to break.

“That’s my little birthday girl!” Papa said with a sudden hand clap. “Hey, sweetheart... you still got that big ole bag of marshmallows?”

“Why, yes, I think I do! I’ll be right back, kids,” Memaw said. “But you children need to find us some good, long sticks to roast them on first.”

As we hunted around their yard for sticks, I looked over at Brad, wondering just how mad I’d made him. He was staring a hole into my head and had both fists balled up tightly. My smile quickly disappeared, as I realized how bad a week it could be for me without Mom and Dad there to watch out for me.

Memaw came back to the campfire with a large gift bag and a small cake.

“Where’s my little birthday girl? Is she six or seven this year?” she asked, pretending not to see me.

“I’m eight now, Memaw. You know that!”

“You got those candles I bought yesterday?” Papa asked.

“I sure do!” she said, watching him dig in his pocket for a lighter.

After he lit the candles, they all sang *Happy Birthday* to me. Well, all but Brad. I could tell he wasn’t really singing. He was just moving his lips while he scowled at me. Dad told me to make a wish before blowing out the candles. I looked at Brad menacingly, with narrowed eyes.

“Oh, I have the *perfect* wish!”

“Mom!” he whined. “She’s making a wish against me! Isn’t she in trouble for that?”

“Christy, be nice to your brother,” she told me, though I sensed she secretly commended my snarky threat.

With one last bratty glance at Brad, I made my birthday wish, which actually had *nothing* to do with him. Then, with a deep breath, I blew out all eight candles! Then I blew them out again... and again! One by one, they defied physics, sparking back to life!

“Walter... you didn’t!” Memaw said.

Papa nearly fell over laughing, then held up an empty package labeled, *Magic Re-Light Candles*. Memaw quickly picked the melted candle wax out of my cake and tossed the pieces into the campfire. By then my cake had a small, black cloud of smoke hovering over it. Brad laughed when I coughed from the fumes. I slowly turned my head and looked him straight in the eyes.

“I made the same wish *three* times, Bradley,” I said. “So you’d better not look under your bed tonight!”

“Mom!” he whined again.

“Here! Just open the bag, dear,” Memaw said, putting it on my lap. Inside was a Lite-Brite and two smaller packages. One contained a Kid’s Version New Testament Bible and the other one held a set of play jewelry. A bling-ring, with matching bracelet and a diamond necklace, all shining brightly in their glory! They were made of some kind of plastic, I think, but were nice and heavy.

“What do you think, honey?” Memaw asked.

“I love them!” I said, holding up the necklace to show everyone.

“I lovvvve themmm!” Brad mocked.

“You’re just jealous, Bradley Pooper!” I replied, sticking out my tongue.

After eating the biggest piece of cake, my birthday celebration with the gramps ended. I knew the next morning I’d go back to being just a regular family member again.

Breakfast consisted of cereal, oatmeal and bacon. Afterwards, Brad begged Papa to go out on the boat. Papa agreed, but said we’d have to wait an hour since we’d just eaten. No one was going to swim, but that was his rule when being anywhere *near* the water. At 10:30, Brad’s phone alarm went off.

“It’s time, Papa!” He hollered from the family room. A minute later, Papa strutted past the TV with his lucky fishing jacket and trousers on.

“Walter! You’re not fishing with those kids in the boat, are you? There’s not enough room!” Memaw said, blocking his path.

“I’m just taking one pole, dear! We’ll share it... right, kids? No one’s getting their eyes poked out today, I promise.”

We both agreed, out-voting Memaw three to one.

“C’mon, kids! I’ll let you youngins pick out the fishing spot!”

We were off to the lake, which meant walking to the end of their backyard and opening a gate. I suddenly remembered the two ducks Memaw and Papa kept as pets in their backyard four years earlier. Dad had told us their cocker spaniel chased them around the yard constantly, biting at their tailfeathers. It got so bad, he said, that Papa had to put them both in the lake in order to save their lives. Less than an hour later, two alligators got their bellies full! When Papa first heard the commotion, he ran outside with his shotgun, but didn’t shoot. He said it was

because Florida considered alligators to be an endangered species. I was very angry with Papa when I heard about the ducks.

Papa untied the boat from his fence post and, one at a time, we got inside. It dipped to and fro from our weight, scaring me. Brad, on the other hand, was fearless, even having to be told twice to sit down after he got in.

“You sit in the front, pretty lady. I’ll sit in the middle and you at the stern, young man. And be still, Bradley!”

We settled into our assigned seats as Papa used an oar to push us off. Brad asked Papa why he didn’t have a motor for the boat.

“Motors are for weak sissies!” he said. “Why do you think God gave us arms? They’re for rowing boats!” I wasn’t so sure of his answer, but that was papa’s logic on the matter.

The water looked like black glass. There was no wind, so the only ripples came from our boat and a large turtle that had breached the surface. My hands held tightly to the bench seat as I stared at the dark water ahead. It was a big, scary lake, certainly not a friendly, little pond! Still, I *was* looking at it through eight year-old eyes.

“Now, kids, I won’t have any goofing around or fighting on my boat. It could flip over if we’re not careful. Believe me, you don’t want to get stuck in that muck on the lake’s bottom. It’s stickier than otter poop! This lake is famous for disappearances. You get stuck down there and you’ll *never* come up again! There’s a rumor a jumbo jet crashed right over there, smack-dab in the middle! They say it sunk so deep in that muck that they never could find it! I heard it’s still down there on the bottom somewhere, with all its passengers still buckled in their seats!”

I felt my heart race. I looked at Brad, who rolled his eyes. If he hadn’t done that, I would have fully believed Papa. He teased us a lot, but some of his stories were hard for me to tell from the truth.

My hands gripped even tighter to my aluminum seat, though. I carefully put my bling-ring on my thumb, worried it would slip off into the water. Brad saw me and rolled his eyes again.

“Now listen closely, kids. I’m going to let you know my secret to catching fish out here, but you have to *promise* not to tell anyone, including your father. I use a

special bait to catch my bluegill. You have to promise me, though. If anyone else finds out, I'll know who told 'em!"

"We promise!" both of us answered in unison, with Brad adding "Jinx!" before I could.

Papa looked around, making sure no one else was watching, then reached into his coat. He pulled out a small sandwich baggie. Inside were tiny chunks of pink meat... from last night's dinner.

"That's just ham, Papa," Brad said, noticeably disappointed.

"Shush!" Papa shook his head *no*. "No, no boy... this *isn't* just ham. I salted this up good, in a special brine of my own. You watch! Bluegill will fight each other to the death over this stuff! They smell the salty flavor in the water and the protein, too. Why, I even had a big one jump in my boat once, grab some ham out of my hand, then jump back in the lake! The damn thing even winked at me before going under the water again!"

Even at eight years old, I knew that story was a bunch of baloney. Fish don't wink. Not over ham, anyway. We both watched as Papa baited a hook and clipped a bobber to the line. The next thing I knew, I was dodging his cast, with the steel hook barely missing my head!

Brad laughed loudly and pointed at me, "Dangit! You missed her, Papa. Try again!"

A few seconds after his bait sank under the water, the bobber jerked violently.

"Looky there, kids! We got one already, and in under ten seconds! That's a new world record for bluegill catchin'!" he said, reeling it in.

Brad and I watched as he pulled the fish into the boat. It was a bluegill, alright... about six inches long.

"Wow! Look at this beast! He's over a foot long!" Papa announced, "Biggest bluegill I ever hauled outta this lake! Open the lid on that bucket, Brad! Hey, kids, we catch a few more like *this* and we'll be eating fish tonight! Brad, you can help me clean 'em. Just takes a sharp knife and a strong stomach."

For once, I was glad Brad was getting to do something I wasn't. Less than fifteen minutes later, we had five more fish in the bucket. Papa turned the rod over to me next, making Brad's ears red with jealousy. Papa saw his disapproval.

"She's the birthday girl, Brad. You'll get your chance in a few minutes. Just be patient," he said.

After some needed instruction, Papa helped me make a good cast. I was so excited to have a chance to catch a fish before my brother. Five minutes went by with no bites... then another five. Brad laughed and began to explain how women weren't really made for fishing.

"If God wanted women to fish, he wouldn't have named us 'fishermen'. Women are supposed to stay in the kitchen and cook what we catch. It's a fact!"

"Now, Brad," Papa frowned, "that's not true at all. I've caught thousands of fish since I married your Memaw. You know how many she's cooked? None. Hates the smell of it. I have to do it all myself then open all the windows to air out the house! After that, I have to clean up all the mess. So, it's neither men's work nor women's work... it's just work."

Before I could stick out my tongue at Brad, my bobber suddenly disappeared under the water! Papa pointed to it and quickly turned around, his hands raised in caution.

"Hold on, Christy... don't reel him in yet! Wait 'til you feel another good tug, then yank 'er back a little... just enough to set the hook!"

I did as I was told and waited... and waited. Eventually the bobber popped back up and sat on top of the water again, motionless.

"Haha! You lost him, loser!" Brad chided.

"Brad, hush!" Papa said.

Upset with myself, I held the rod up for Papa to take over. He waved me off.

"Be patient, hon... he might still be on the hook, or niblin' at what's left. Just give it a few more—"

All at once, the bobber disappeared under the water again! I instinctively yanked the rod, then felt something pulling it down hard!

"You got 'em! Oh, boy, you got 'em!" Papa said. "Now, reel him in and let's see what we got!"

"It's too strong, Papa!" I said, starting to panic.

"You're just weak!" Brad laughed.

As I stood up, struggling to reel in the line, it suddenly sunk deeper under the surface, pulling me forward. I barely held onto the rod!

"Holy smokes! That's no bluegill, Christy! You got something bigger, girl! Oh, damn! I only have 10lb line in this reel! Try not to pull too hard, sweetie! Nice and easy. We don't want to break that line. Let him wear himself out for a while."

For the next fifteen minutes, I wore *myself* out! Papa had me reel it in for a while, then he pushed the button on the reel, releasing the line. After that, he told me to start reeling again. I was confused, but kept doing what he told me. Several times we went through the process, until I was almost out of strength! My thumb was sore from being pinched between the rod and my ring. I managed to take it off and hand it to Papa. He laid it on my seat. That made me even more nervous.

“Okay... you see how he’s not pullin’ as hard anymore? He’s gettin’ tired, Christy. Okay, now... nice and slow... reel him in so we can get a look at that pretty face of his!”

As I reeled in the fish, I saw Brad moving out of the corner of my eye. He was right behind me now. I couldn’t tell if he really wanted me to catch the fish or watch me lose it. Maybe it was a little of both. Then, when he thought I couldn’t see him, he leaned forward and flicked my bling-ring into the water!

“Brad! I saw that! You lost my ring!” I yelled.

“What? I didn’t do anything! It fell in on its own, loser!”

Papa fixed a scowl on Brad, then turned his attention to the fish again.

“Concentrate, Christy! Just a little longer... you almost got him! It’ll be worth it!”

I was so mad at Brad that I almost threw the rod down. But I knew he’d love that... me losing the fish *and* my ring. So, I kept reeling in the line, slowly, like Papa said.

When the bobber was just inches from the boat, the fish breached the water for the first time. Papa’s hands went straight up in the air, as if he’d just seen a ghost!

“Saint Peter’s balls! It’s a largemouth bass! I haven’t seen one of those in this lake for thirty years! This baby must have been livin’ deep in that muck, kids! Probably only coming out every ten years or so!” He turned to me with a look of desperation. “Baby, do you want me to land him for you?”

“No, I want to do it, Papa,” I said, struggling to hold onto the pole.

“Let Papa do it before you lose it, stupid! It’s too big for you!” Brad yelled.

I looked into Papa’s eyes and could see how much he wanted the rod. But he must have seen something in mine as well, as he suddenly relaxed his posture and smiled at me.

“No babe... *you* hooked this big boy and *you’re* going to land it yourself! Just take it slow, you hear me? Now, I don’t have a net, but if you can get his head up again, I’ll pull the bucket underneath him and we’ll scoop him up!”

I reeled in the last two feet of slack as Papa looked to the heavens.

“Please, Lord! Please... let the line hold... just a minute longer!” he prayed.

There was no slack left in the line. The bobber was dipping and surfacing right next to the boat! We could see the fish under the water, trying frantically to get free. Papa grabbed the bucket and held it in the water. All the bluegill swam out, but he didn’t seem to care. He tried to get the bucket near the fish. After three attempts, he stood up straight again, grabbing his back in pain.

“Dammit! I can’t get it under him! You’re going to have to help me, Christy! The next time you see that fish close to the surface, you pull back hard enough to bring his head right out of the water! If we do this together, we can bag him. But don’t pull more than once or that line’ll break and we’ll lose him to the muck forever!”

I watched the water closely, more nervous than I’ve ever been in my life. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Brad leaning forward. Even *he* seemed to be rooting for me now! I kept the line steady and taut, just like Papa told me. Just under the water, I saw the fish circling near the surface again!

“Now, Christy!” Papa yelled. “Pull it up!”

I reared back and pulled hard on the rod! The moment I got the fish’s head out of the water, Papa scooped the bucket under it. Just then, the line snapped! I tripped over Papa’s tackle box, falling backwards! The pole flew out of my hands while I struggled to stay in the boat. As my foot slipped out from under me, I saw Brad grabbing for the fishing pole! On the way to the water, I felt something hard hit my head! The only sensation I remember feeling after that was of coldness.

The next thing I knew, I was back on shore, with Papa kneeling over me. My stomach twisted as I suddenly threw up a bunch of water!

“Oh, mercy! Thank you! Thank you, God!” Papa said, looking to the sky.

His whole body was shaking. I'd never seen my Papa upset before. He sat me up, asking me several times if I was okay. I couldn't stop coughing long enough to answer him, so I just nodded.

He hugged me so hard, he almost caused us both to fall over! I looked to my right and saw Brad next to me. He was crying, and his clothes were soaked, like mine. I figured he fell off the boat trying to save the fishing rod.

"Did we catch the fish?" I asked, still coughing.

"The fish? Baby, you tripped and fell out of the boat! On the way to the water, you cracked your head on the side and sank like a rock! Everything happened so fast. We couldn't see you anywhere! It was like the lake had just swallowed you up!"

I looked at Brad. He was still upset, and breathing hard. I was confused, but Papa continued.

"Bradley jumped in after you, Christy! I watched the water for you, but couldn't see anything in that damn muck! He came up twice, empty-handed. I thought you were gone forever! But somehow, on his third try, he found you down there! We got you in the boat, but you weren't breathing and your heart wasn't beating! We thought you were dead, child! Brad rowed us in while I tried to get the water out of you. We laid you here, on the shore. I told Brad to run and call 911. But then, suddenly, you spit up all that water! You came back to us, Christy! Just like those birthday candles! You sparked right back to life!"

Papa held me so tightly I could barely move. When he finally let go, Brad hugged me, too. I was shocked, as that was the first time he'd ever held me. I hugged him back, whispering "thank you" to him.

An hour later, I was sitting on a hospital bed, surrounded by family. The doctor who examined me said I was a "very lucky little girl" and was going to be okay. After a few tests were done, they discharged me from the hospital. Dad drove everyone back to Papa's house.

After my accident, Mom and Dad didn't go to the Keys. We all did, even Memaw and Papa. Surprisingly, the ocean's water didn't scare me. I wouldn't go out more than waist deep, though, and still don't.

Something changed in our family on that trip. We all became closer to one another. I don't know if it was just because of my accident, but I *do* know this: My brother never called me Anti-Christy again. In fact, all these years later, he's turned out to be my closest friend and support.

As far as Papa and Memaw, they're gone now. But I'll never forget them, that morning on the boat or the bond it created between my brother and I.

Who would have thought one mucky, old lake could do all that?

The End