Francis had, in the hospital waiting room, been transformed into a fisherman. With his wife, Renee, returning for weekly radiation, Francis had sat in the hospital, flipping through volumes of the *Bassmaster* magazine. With each visit, he had found himself increasingly engaged by articles like “Catching the Low-Lying Carp” and “The Do’s and Don’ts of Jigs.” By the time Renee died, the Howard University Hospital had practically become Francis’s fishing ground. The tiled floor was his lake; the massive support pillars were his shaded forest.

As Francis drove along the Washington Turnpike, no one would have guessed that he had been at a funeral; his face was emotionless. Looking into the rearview mirror, he felt guilty. He was supposed to be upset, but he wasn’t. He was supposed to be crying, and yet he sat, feeling more relieved than he had in years. He was relieved that he no longer had to change his wife’s urine-soaked sheets, that he no longer had to dress her, and that he no longer had to brace her back every morning to lower her into her wheelchair. More than anything, he was relieved that he no longer had to sit by Renee’s bedside, trying to make her a fishing expert.

“Which do large mouth bass prefer: a surface lure or a deep jig?” Francis had asked.

“A deep jig?” Renee had responded, staring at a pair of squirrels that were mating on the windowsill.

“No, don’t you remember? Bass are surface feeders. You must have been thinking about catfish.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking about,” Renee had said, laughing to herself.
It was almost dark by the time Francis reached The Fairfax Estates, a residential neighborhood that used to be The Potomac Outlook. Francis followed the narrow drive, winding beneath the forest canopy, or rather, what was left of it. Overdevelopment had swept across the landscape, destroying its natural beauty. Where a little spring had once bubbled, there stood a public septic system; where a patch of wild bluebells had blossomed, there was a public tennis court. An economic boom had swept across McLean, Virginia, making a swarm of new millionaires. Each of them wanted a small piece of the forest.

Upon opening the car door, Francis was greeted by the cold air. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, letting the air fill his lungs. He exhaled, absorbing the splendor of his surroundings. Already, the trees radiated stunning fall colors; shades of red and orange filled forest.

“Howdy there Francis,” Clifton called, waving as he sprinted by. Clifton was an exercise fanatic; he was always on the move.

“Hey there Clifton,” Francis replied, bending over to tie his shoelace. “How are things?” he asked, looking up. There was no response; Clifton was already gone.

Walking down the gravel path to his house, Francis admired his favorite tree, a tiny yellow birch. It stood, dwarfed by the rest of the forest; its knobby branches were barely as high as the first story of the house. Francis smiled; this little tree had instigated such big arguments.

“It’s kind of ugly,” Renee said, showing Francis the picture she had just taken.

“What is?” Francis asked.

“Look at it,” Renee responded, pointing to the birch tree. “I can’t take your picture here. Those branches are practically palm-ing your head,” she continued, adjusting the aperture of her camera lens. She toggled through the menu screen, making sure that all the other settings were correct.

“Why don’t you just take my picture over here?” Francis asked, pointing to the porch. “That looks like an okay place.”

“You’re missing the point, Francis,” Renee replied, throwing her hands in the air.

“I am?”
“Look, let’s just get rid of the tree,” Renee responded, looking through the viewfinder of her camera. She was practically a professional photographer; several of her pictures had been featured in the local newspaper.

“It might make a good project,” Francis replied, grabbing one of the birch’s branches. “It has character.” Francis walked around the tree, letting his hand fall over each branch.

“Oh God,” Renee said playfully, setting her camera down.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, let’s see. The garage door no longer closes,” Renee said, gesturing towards the garage. “I believe that’s one of your projects. My art studio is filled with carabineers and belay ropes from your project to become a mountain climber. The—”

“I work hard,” Francis interrupted, letting go of the birch. “I cook and clean, and I drive to Daphne’s every weekend to pick up your imported wine.”

“What are you talking about? Renee asked, laughing at Francis’s defensive tone. She picked up her camera again and started adjusting its shutter speed.

“I can never get work done because I’m always running errands for you,” Francis replied, looking down to avoid Renee’s gaze.

“You don’t get anything done because you never get up and do it,” Renee responded, leaving to go inside.

As if forgetting something important, Francis rushed back to his car, grabbing his latest subscription of *Bassmaster* from the passenger’s seat.

Whether at his wife’s bedside or alone in the house, Francis always had a *Bassmaster* magazine. On his late night hospital vigils, he had read to Renee, explaining the intricacies of spoon, surface, and plug lures. He had spoken with the conviction of a fishing master, though he had never left Renee’s side.

“You can go fishing, Francis. I won’t mind,” Renee had said, adjusting the pillow under her neck.

“But you need me,” Francis had responded. “Besides, I haven’t taught you the art of fly fishing.”

With his magazine in hand, Francis scrambled to the garage, forcing open the sticky hinges of the door. The room was filled
with a dense, musty air. Forty years of aging had given it the ripe aroma of a cigar box. On the walls, oil splatters marked Francis’s attempts to build a mountain bike; he had failed three times.

As he stepped into the garage, a guilty sense of freedom overwhelmed him. For the first time in two years, Francis was thinking and moving for himself. He placed the magazine down on a bench and turned to the page entitled “Fishing Checklist.” With the precision of a doctor, he started loading his tacklebox. He placed each lure, weight, and bobber purposefully. Pausing for a moment, Francis rolled up his sleeves, not wanting to get oil on his funeral attire. He moved through the checklist. Like an engineer, he tugged at the reel seat, testing its integrity. His fingers walked up the drag line, applying tension to it, inspecting it for any signs of weakness. He oiled the bail and tested its release function. Everything was perfect.

For the past two years, the garage had been Francis’s sanctuary. When Renee had been healthy enough to live at home, Francis had snuck out to the garage. Under the mask of darkness, he had stooped against its walls, his bare feet digging into the gravel. Here, he had practiced casting for hours into an invisible lake. With a flashlight attached to his head and a fishing magazine at his feet, Francis had perfected his release.

At a little past midnight, Francis retired from the garage, collapsing into bed fully clothed. He couldn’t help grinning, talking aloud about his plans for tomorrow. He said a prayer for good weather and went to sleep.

On the inside, Francis’s home looked like a living orchestra of the Antiques Road Show: The African Edition. Each room was decorated with ivory tusks, ceremonial masks, and handmade golden jewelry. Without ever leaving the house, Francis had acquired, through mail, artifacts from all over Africa.

“Why can’t we just visit Africa?” Renee had always complained each time a new package arrived at the doorstep. “Because you wouldn’t appreciate it,” Francis had always responded. “You haven’t researched it like I have. I’ve practically been there already.”

Above the kitchen door, a single picture hung, offsetting the African theme. Renee had placed it here, knowing that Francis
would see it at least three times a day. In the picture, Francis and Renee stood as a youthful couple on the top of Mount Washington. Although it was freezing at the time, Francis was topless, his arm around Renee who was wearing nothing but a short white skirt. Their regular hiking gear and clothes had been tucked away, outside the view of the camera lens. Renee had planned the outing for their tenth anniversary; it was only time Francis had ever used his climbing gear. As Francis walked towards the kitchen, he snuck a glance at this photograph for nostalgia. In the kitchen, Francis wasted no time with breakfast and was in his car before dawn.

Francis was pleased that his car was the only one in the lot. It was too early for other visitors; the sun had not risen yet. As if preparing for a major sporting event, Francis began to stretch. He rolled his neck around in circles, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. He bent over to touch his toes, holding the position for a few seconds. Francis was ready to experience fishing firsthand. He could smell the dew-soaked leaves and hear the susurrus of swaying branches. A sign reading Lake Accotink Park dangled from a tree, marking the path entrance. The park was ready for Francis to enter.

The trail was quite treacherous; the forest floor was slick, retaining its morning dampness. Francis made each stride deliberately, making sure not to slip on the moss-coated rocks. His rubber fishing boots were not suited for the terrain. With the lake still nowhere in sight, Francis grew impatient; he started to run, his old joints creaking with each step.

The beaten trail finally converged with a grassy campground. Almost immediately, Francis’s spirit was dampened. The landscape bore none of the beauty that his brochure had described. The majestic lake was pathetic; it was almost too small to be a pond. Beer cans hung like seedlings from the hunched over cattails. “So this is a timeless splendor,” Francis thought. Closer to the pond, a half-assembled tent stood, only feet from the shore. Its corners sagged inwards, supported by two plastic spikes that fought to stay anchored in the soggy soil. Next to the tent, a pile of ashes smoldered, casting a hint of black smoke into the air. Outside, two young men were snoring, their bodies buried deeply into sleeping
bags. Under their cots, a pile of garbage remained, a vestige of the previous night’s activities. Hovering above the sleeping bags, two more men stood, seemingly less hung over. They were decorating the snoring duo with toothpaste and black mud from the pond.

Their laughter was undoubtedly scaring away all the fish.

Walking around the pond, Francis looked for the landmarks that his brochure had described. There weren’t any woodpecker boxes lining the trees or fountains re-oxygenating the water. The landscape bore a resemblance to the brochure picture but only slightly. Francis strained his eyes, surveying the pond in its entirety; there were a few woodpecker boxes after all. They were barely visible, obscured by the thick river bulrush that had choked them out.

After picking out a dry spot to sit, Francis settled into fishing mode. His hands shook as he tried to fasten the drag line to his reel; he struggled to muster up dexterity. The cold air magnified his lack of coordination. Using his left hand, Francis held his right wrist steady, bracing it long enough for him to cast. With a plopping sound, a red and white bobber emerged from the water, bouncing up and down in the almost non-existent current. Watching its twitching motions, Francis grew excited. An acid-induced knot filled his stomach, and a cold shiver raised the hairs on his neck. This was what he had waited for.

With each passing minute, Francis’s childlike anticipation subsided until he looked at the bobber with boredom. He glanced across the pond to see what the young men were up to. At the moment, they were having a splash competition; every cannonball sent ripples down the pond. Two hours passed, and nothing happened; the bobber sat motionless in the water. Thinking that maybe his bait had fallen off the hook, he reeled in his line. Close to shore, the lure became tangled in a patch of muddy pond slop.

Francis tugged impatiently, trying to force the hook free. The rod bowed from the tension, but the pond refused to release its prey. Leaning back, Francis tugged harder. The hook finally came free, whizzing by his face and wrapping around a low-hanging tree branch. “Shit,” Francis yelled, pulling at the branch. The men across the pond, who were busy batting beer cans with a wiffleball bat, paused from their game, laughing.
“Do you fellas mind? You’ve been jumping around and acting like idiots all day,” Francis called, still pulling at the tree.

“You’re the dumbass that’s trying to fish during October. The fish are dead you stupid shit,” a voice replied.

A second voice butted in, “Dude, come on, he’s old.”

“I’ve done more in my life then you punks could ever dream of doing,” Francis called back, releasing his grip on the tree limb.

“Oh yeah, you’re a real doer. You’re out here by yourself trying to pull a fishing rod off a tree. You really live it up,” the first voice called back.

“You,” Francis started. “You are nothing but thugs,” he yelled back. He turned, fumbling around for his tacklebox which was buried in a thicket of cattails. He picked it up, brushing it off with one hand; he had had enough of Lake Accotink for one day. With his fishing rod still tangled in the tree, Francis left the pond; his adventure had ended hours before he had expected.

For the first time, Francis was relieved to be in rush-hour traffic. The nut jobs on the Washington Turnpike were far better company than the punks at the pond. “How the hell do all these people have a place to go?” Francis asked aloud, watching as cars weaved in and out of his lane. Everyone seemed anxious to get somewhere; each driver seemed to have an important destination off in the horizon. Francis had nothing to do and nowhere to go; he was just driving home.

Walking up the porch steps, Francis spotted the little yellow birch; it was always illuminated in the afternoon. “Ah yes, my project,” Francis said.

Francis hurried to the garage. He shuffled through a metal storage closet, grabbing his toolbox and some leftover plywood. “Where is that book?” he asked, rummaging through a filing cabinet. He flipped through the B section: *How to Braid the Perfect Basket, The Players Guide to Bocce, Become a Better Baker, and Birdhouses for Dummies.* He grabbed the birdhouse book and returned to the birch tree ready to build. He started by measuring and cutting out all the pieces: the angled roof, the inside and outside joints, and the walls. Before applying any glue, Francis sanded everything, making sure that each piece was smooth. With the book open at his feet, Francis finished assembling the birdhouse in just under an hour.
While standing back to admire his work, Francis heard the shuffling of gravel and the swishing sound of athletic pants.

“Francis, how are you doing? I heard about the wife,” Clifton remarked, jogging down the driveway.

“I’m managing I guess,” Francis replied, turning to face Clifton.

“Yeah, I see that. Looks like you were fishing today,” Clifton remarked, tugging at Francis’s vest. “Is that a new birdhouse as well?” he asked, stepping forward to touch it.

“Yes sir,” Francis replied, smiling at his handiwork. “I built—”

“I’ve got to get going,” Clifton interrupted, looking down at his watch. “Gotta keep the heart rate up. But, I’m glad you’re keeping busy.” As he ran up the driveway, Clifton called back, “By the way, you forgot to make a hole in the birdhouse.” With that comment, Clifton was gone.

Francis stared at the tree, embarrassed by his creation; there was no entrance. The birdhouse was more like an impenetrable fortress. As if possessed, Francis returned to the garage to find his axe. He rummaged through drawers, fumbling through boxes of rusted garden tools. By the time Francis found his axe, the garage floor was littered with spades and clippers.

With the axe in hand, Francis returned to the tree. He ripped off his fishing vest and tossed it into the woods. For a moment, he stared blankly at the birch. He had no clue how to swing an axe; he had never purchased a *How to Chop a Tree* book. With an improvised stance, Francis started to swing, using an unorthodox combination of overhead and sidearm strokes. Although the trunk was no thicker than a lamppost, it took nearly half-an-hour for the birch to fall.

Alone, Francis settled up against the splintered stump. Already, the tree’s wounds filled the air with a bittersweet aroma. For a while, Francis lay there, his hands at his sides. He had nothing to do and no one to take care of. If he wanted to explore Africa, he could get up and go. If he wanted to go mountain climbing, he had all the gear purchased. Hell, if he wanted to fix the garage door, he could; he had the tools. Francis didn’t get up though. He just sat, flipping through his birdhouse book again. He imagined constructing a massive birdhouse, one that all the birds of the for-
est could flock to. He pictured sitting on the lawn, watching birds flying in from around all.
The sound of a chirping bird brought Francis back to reality; a robin was behind him, roosting on his birdhouse. “Get out of here,” Francis said, waving his hands at the robin. The bird took off instantly, vanishing into the forest. With the robin gone, Francis stared at his failed project. He laughed; he would never build a massive birdhouse. He didn’t really want to. For Francis, the thought of a new project or adventure was good enough; in fact, it was better.

Francis closed his *Birdhouses for Dummies* and tossed it aside. “I got rid of the tree for you,” he began, looking up towards the sky. “It’s the first project I actually finished,” he continued. Francis ran his fingers across the splintered birch trunk, unsure of what to say next. “I’m sorry I blamed you, Renee,” he said, breaking the silence. “You’ve never stopped me from anything,” he added. Shifting to a more comfortable position, Francis closed his eyes.