

# catfisting | Rich Martens

I was twelve when I met my cousin Bruiser for the first and only time. Bruiser wasn't his real name, of course, but it suited him better than any birth name. He was two years older than me, a freshman in high school. Put us side-by-side, and you would never guess we were related.

He was six-and-a-half feet tall. He walked with a heaving swagger, his enormous, eczema-studded arms rigidly held at his sides. When we went to McDonald's, he ate an entire twenty-piece Chicken McNugget meal with a supersized fry and Coke and still had room for two apple pies.

I've always been a city boy, so when Bruiser asked me if I wanted to catch some fish for dinner, I was already hesitant.

"It's important," my mother said, "that you see where our family came from." If this is what my life would be if grandma had stayed in southern Missouri, then she's wiser than I give her credit for.

Bruiser and I walked out of his parent's bungalow towards a small pond a quarter mile down the dusty, unpaved road.

"Hey," I said, tilting my head back towards the house, "shouldn't we grab some fishing poles?"

"Naw," he said and held up the paint bucket full of slop dangling in his right hand. "We got aaall we need right here." It was my great-grandpa's infamous catfish bait, a recipe guaranteed to drive catfish in from the deepest, backwater swamps of Louisiana. Being family, Bruiser shared the recipe with me, but even I'm not careless enough to break my oath of silence, suffice it to say chicken livers, dog food, garlic cloves, and pig intestines are high on the list of ingredients.

When we arrived at the lake, Bruiser got down on one knee into a patch of dried-up crabgrass next to the mossiest inlet he could find. He stuck his chapped hand into the paint bucket and swirled his arm around in the bucket as best he could. Little chunks of raw chicken livers and unbroken garlic cloves stuck to the coarse, blonde hairs of his arm. When he was satisfied, he chucked what remained in the bucket into the pond. The bait was thick and pale and floated along with the algae on the surface of the lake. I covered my nose with my shirt as he plunged his arm into the water.

For a moment, everything was silent. Bruiser bit his tongue

and darted his eyes around as if he were thinking very hard. And then, a look of pain came over his face.

He pulled his arm out of the water along with the biggest catfish I'd ever seen (not that I'd seen many catfish before then). The fish clung to his cantaloupe-sized fist and flailed around on his knuckles, stinging him unmercifully. Even for Bruiser, the catfish was a worthy opponent; the sheer mass of the struggling thing on his arm was enough to make him lose his balance. He focused his attention on remaining upright while the fish tried desperately to release itself, but Bruiser was no amateur at catfisting. He held on to the fish's bony lips from the inside so it couldn't squirm away.

"Oh my God!" I hollered at the sight of blood running down the length of his forearm and dripping like a leaky faucet off his elbow.

But Bruiser, he remained unaffected. He looked at me, and then back at the fish struggling for life on the end of his arm. "Psh, he'll run out of air soon!"

He walked the entire trip back to the house with the dead catfish in one hand and the empty paint bucket in the other. Once there, my aunt Loraine yanked it off and began scaling it for dinner.