

Gone Fishing

by Douglas Preston, 1956–

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All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.



The Ford Taurus hissed along the slick road, topped the hill and emerged from the woods. A sudden panorama of farms and green fields spread out below, a cluster of white houses and a church steeple along a dark river.

“Speed limit’s forty-five,” said Woffler, voice tense.

“Don’t get your undies in a bunch,” Perotta replied. “I was born driving a car.” He glanced over at the carpenter: the man’s face was white, and the faggoty earring he wore in his left ear—a gold ring with a red stone on it—was practically trembling with agitation. Woffler and his whining was starting to get on his nerves.

“I’m not worried about your driving,” Woffler said. “I’m worried about getting stopped. You know, as in cops?” And he nodded pointedly at the velvet bag on the seat between them.

“Yeah, yeah.” Perotta slowed to fifty as the car descended the hill toward the town. “Need a potty break, guy?”

“I could use something to eat. It’s dinnertime.”

A diner lay at the near end of town in what looked like a converted gas station. Six pickup trucks sat in the dirt parking lot.

“Welcome to Buttcrack, New Hampshire,” said Perotta.

They got out of the car and approached the diner. Perotta paused in the doorway, surveying the clientele.

“They grow ’em big up here, don’t they?” he said. “Or do you think it’s inbreeding?”

They took a booth next to the window, where they could keep an eye on the car. The waitress came waddling over. “What can I get you folks?” she said, smiling.

“How about menus?” Perotta said.

The smile disappeared. She nodded toward the wall. “It’s all up there.”

Perotta scanned the board. “Gimme a cheeseburger, fries and a side of grilled onions. Make it rare. Coffee.”

“Same for me,” said Woffler. “Except I’ll take my burger well done. And no onions.”

The waitress waddled off and Perotta followed her with his eyes. As she passed a far booth he saw a man with tats and a tank top staring at him. He was a big man, pumped up. Something about him made Perotta think of prison.

He considered staring the scumbag down, then decided against it. This wasn’t the time. He turned back to his partner.

“We did it, Woffler,” he said in a low voice. “We freaking did it.”

“We haven’t done anything yet,” Woffler replied. “Don’t talk about it in here. And don’t call me by name.”

“Who’s listening? Anyway, we’re hundreds of miles from New York City—and nobody’s even noticed it’s missing yet.”

“You don’t know that.”

They sat in silence. The man with the tats lit up a cigarette and no one told him to put it out. Within minutes the waitress came out with their burgers, slid them on the table.

Perotta checked, as he always did. “I said rare. R-A-R-E. This is well done.”

Without a word the waitress picked up his plate, took it back into the kitchen. Perotta noticed the guy with the tats was staring at him again.

The plate came back out and Perotta checked. Still not rare enough. He began to signal the waitress when Woffler stopped him.

“Will you just eat your burger?”

“But it’s not rare.”

Woffler leaned forward. "Do you really want to make a big scene right now, so everyone'll remember us?"

Perotta thought about that for a moment and decided that Woffler might be right. He ate the burger in silence, drank the coffee. He was hungry. They'd been driving since before dawn, stopping only for gas and candy bars.

They paid, and Perotta stiffed the waitress. It was the least he could do, a matter of principle. What was so hard about making a hamburger rare?

As they got in the car, the tattooed man emerged from the diner and walked over. He leaned an arm into Perotta's open window.

"What the hell do you want?" Perotta asked.

The man smiled. Up close, Perotta could see the guy had an old tracheotomy scar right below his Adam's apple. His teeth were the color of urine.

"Just wishing you a nice trip. And offering a piece of advice." He spoke pleasantly, rolling a toothpick around in his mouth.

"And what advice might that be?"

"Don't come back to our town again. Ever."

"No chance of that. You can keep your Shitville, or whatever you call this dump."

He jammed his foot down on the accelerator, fishtailing out of the parking lot and pelting the man with dust and gravel. He glanced in the rearview mirror: the guy was slapping dust from his arms but didn't seem to be making a move to follow them.

"Why do you always have to make a spectacle of yourself?" Woffler asked. "You just left two people in that town who'll have no problem identifying us in a lineup, even months from now."

"How's anyone going to know we ever came through here?"

Woffler just shook his head.

The road entered another forest, the damp asphalt shining like blued steel in the dying light. With one hand on the wheel, Perotta reached over with the other and tipped up the velvet bag, letting the object slide out. Even in the dim light, the glow of the artifact seemed to fill the car. Perotta had read the label on the case at the museum a dozen times; he could practically quote it by heart. It was an Inca Tumi knife, used in human sacrifices to cut through the breastbone of the victim. The blade itself was made of copper and badly corroded; but the elaborate handle, cast in massive gold, was as fresh as the day it was hammered. It depicted the Sican Lord, the god of death, with staring ruby eyes and a grimace of turquoise teeth.

"Will you look at that?" he said, chuckling. "Two million bucks."

"If we can fence it."

"There's gotta be some Arab sheikh or Japanese businessman out there who collects this stuff. And even if we can't, we can always pry the stones out and melt the thing down. Those rubies are probably twenty carats each. I bet we could get fifty grand for them, plus a shitload for the gold."

"Fifty grand's a lot less than two million."

"Woffler, I'm getting a little tired of your negativity. No one made you do it."

Woffler looked out the window at the blur of dark woods. "I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

“And it *was* a good idea. A freaking brilliant idea! We saw our chance and took it. You liked building cases at the museum for twenty bucks an hour? As for me, I got tired of shaking doors and checking IDs.”

“You aren’t worried about Lipski?”

“Screw him. He’s just a middleman. The real buyer’s that guy in Peru.”

“What about him? How’s he going to react?”

“What’s he gonna do? Fly up here and comb America for us? Nah, he’s going to assume Lipski ripped him off and put a cap in his ass.”

“He sounds like somebody important.”

“If you want my opinion, the guy’s a psychopath. Probably wants the knife back so he can rip out a few more hearts, just like his ancestors. I bet he doesn’t even know we exist.”

“Even if he doesn’t, Lipski does. And he’s going to be looking for us.”

“You think he’ll find us at Passumkeag Lake? I’d like to see him, with his Armani suits and handmade shoes, stomping around the New Hampshire woods trying to find two guys bass fishing in the middle of nowhere.” Perotta laughed. “I really would.”

“Slow down, we’re coming to another town.”

They flashed past a sign that said Waldo Falls. Just to shut Woffler up, Perotta eased down to the speed limit.

They passed a row of white farmhouses, a church, a firehouse, a neat town square with a Civil War monument and a rusted cannon.

“Welcome to beautiful downtown Dildo Falls,” Perotta said. “Can you believe people live in a place like this?”

“As a matter of fact, I can.”

In a moment they had left the town behind them and were back in the endless north woods. Perotta started to accelerate, then abruptly slowed again. “Jesus, will you look at that,” he said, pointing. “It’s like a time warp.”

A battered VW bus was pulled off the road in a muddy turnout. It was covered with peace signs, feminist symbols, painted pot leaves and psychedelic flowers. A man with long greasy hair sat smoking in the driver’s seat. He watched them go by.

Perotta gave a couple of honks as he passed.

“What’d you do that for?”

“Didn’t you see the bumper sticker? *Honk If You’re Pro-Choice*. Hey, I’m pro-choice. Line the girls up and let me choose,” he cackled.

“Why don’t you just hang a sign out the window, saying, *Obnoxious museum thief on his way to cabin hideout?*”

“Whaddya mean?”

“What I mean is, every town we go through, Perotta, you do something to attract attention.”

“Look, will you lighten up? In case you hadn’t noticed, it’s over. We did it. Quit worrying and enjoy the vacation. When the heat’s off, we can figure out how to fence it, or melt it down, or whatever. In the meantime, we’ve gone fishing.”

Woffler sighed heavily. His face looked gray. “I’m no good at this.”

“You’ll do better next time.”

“There won’t be a next time.”

The side road wound through the dark trees and then suddenly they were at the lake, walled in on all sides by hemlocks. Perotta eased off the gas. The rented cabin stood off to the right, with a sloping wooden porch. A needle-strewn path led to a crooked dock on the bouldered shore. The pond was deathly still in the falling twilight and the water was black.

Perotta shut off the car and turned off the headlights, and they sat there in silence a moment while the engine ticked and cooled. There was no other sound save for the steady drone of insects. After a moment they got out of the car and took their luggage and bags of groceries inside.

The cabin was cool and musty, all the furniture draped in sheets dotted with dead flies. Woffler cleaned up while Perotta cooked up a pot of pasta with tomato sauce and fresh basil. After dinner they started a fire and sipped from snifters full of Chivas. The Tumi knife lay on the coffee table, gleaming in the reflected firelight, the ruby eyes flashing and jumping.

“Feeling better?” Perotta asked.

“I’m getting there.”

He nodded at the knife. “How many beating human hearts you think they cut out with it?”

“We should hide it.”

“Nah, let’s enjoy it for a moment.”

They lapsed into silence. Perotta took another sip of scotch, enjoying the fiery sensation as it slid down his gullet. Here they were in the deep woods, four hundred miles from New York, and every mile had taken them farther into the boonies. The fire popped and crackled on the grate. He gave a sigh of satisfaction.

When the soft knock came at the door, almost below the threshold of audibility, it startled Perotta so much he slopped half his drink into his lap.

“Who the hell—?”

Woffler was already up, hand on the Tumi knife. He slipped it into the velvet bag and disappeared into the bathroom. Perotta went to the window, flattened himself sideways, opened the curtains, and peered out.

“Who is it?” Woffler asked as he came out of the bathroom.

“Nobody. There’s nobody there. What’d you do with it?”

“In the toilet tank.”

Perotta went to the door. Hand on the knob, he hesitated a moment. Then he opened it and stepped out on the porch.

The hemlocks were like a dark wall all around the cabin, and they sighed in the night breeze. The surface of the lake gleamed like ruffled velvet in the moonlight.

He stepped back inside, stared at Woffler. “It was a knock, right?”

“Sure sounded like one.”

Perotta reached for a tissue, dabbed at his wet pants. “Maybe it was a branch or something.”

They sat back down at the fire. Perotta took another slug of Chivas, but the spell was broken.

“How long you figure we have to stay up here?” Woffler asked.

“Don’t know. Three, maybe four weeks.”

“Think the heat will be off by then?”

“One way or another.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Lipski—”

And then the soft knock came again. This time, Perotta sprang up and rushed the door, throwing it open.

Nobody.

“Go see if someone’s around back of the cabin,” said Woffler.

“I’ll need a flashlight first.”

They searched through the kitchen drawers and finally found one full of flashlights and packages of batteries. They went back into the living room and stood there, uneasy.

“You think it’s some kids?” Perotta asked.

“We’re ten miles from the nearest town. And they wouldn’t be out messing around on a weeknight.”

“Maybe the landlord’s a practical joker.”

“The landlord,” Woffler said stiffly, “is eighty and lives down in Westchester County.”

They stood there, uncertain what to do next. Finally Perotta went to the door, opened it and shined the light into the dark woods. The beam played feebly among the dark trunks.

“There!” Woffler said from behind him.

“I didn’t see anything.”

“It was right there. Something white, moving.”

Woffler came forward now, playing his own flashlight beam into the woods.

“Hey!” Perotta yelled. “Who’s out there?”

He could hear his voice echoing faintly back from the far side of the pond.

Woffler walked to the edge of the porch and shined the flashlight into the wall of trees. “There!” he said, stabbing with his beam.

Now Perotta thought he saw something, too. It looked like the figure of a man in white.

“Go see who it is,” he said.

“Me?”

“You’re the one that saw him,” Perotta reasoned.

“I’m not going out there.”

“The hell you aren’t. Look, somebody has to stand guard here. Don’t worry, I’ll watch your back.”

Reluctantly, Woffler walked down the steps and slowly made his way toward the edge of the woods, twenty-five feet away. He stopped, swung his beam around. Then he took a step into the trees.

“There’s someone in here,” he called back, uneasiness clear in his voice. “Someone was spying on us, and look—there are footprints in the wet needles.”

“Follow him. Find out what the bastard wants.”

“But—”

“Do it.”

Woffler hung back a moment, hesitating. Then he stepped forward and disappeared into the woods. Perotta waited on the porch, watching the beam flicker and bob through the trees until it was gone, swallowed up by the woods.

Suddenly it seemed very quiet.

As he waited on the porch, he started to feel a little uneasy himself. He tried to push the feeling aside. Nobody, he reminded himself, could know they were there: nobody. Woffler had rented the cabin online, using a bank account he'd set up in the name and social security number of a dead man. They had planned it down to the last detail. Woffler was good at the details; Perotta had to admit he never could have pulled it off himself.

He wondered if the guy with the tattooed arms had followed them up here and was trying to pull some shit. But that run-in was almost thirty miles back, and he was sure they hadn't been followed.

He checked his watch. Ten minutes to ten.

Where the hell was Woffler?

Maybe it *was* Woffler. Maybe all his anxiety was just an act. Maybe he hadn't really seen anything in the woods. Maybe this was all an excuse for him to run off with the artifact himself. He might have rented another car, stashed it somewhere nearby.

Perotta skipped back into the house, ducked into the bathroom, pulled the cover off the toilet tank. The knife was there all right, wrapped in its sodden velvet pouch. He replaced the cover and walked thoughtfully back out to the porch.

Could it be Lipski, after all? It didn't seem likely. Sure, Lipski knew by now they'd pulled some shit on him—they were supposed to deliver the knife before 5:00 p.m.—but how would he know where they'd gone? And it sure as hell wasn't the rich Peruvian Lipski claimed to be dealing with, the one who wanted the artifact back for his ancestors or something like that. It was way too early for him to know he'd been screwed.

He supposed it *could* be Lipski. But how could he trace them? Through Woffler's car, maybe? That was the one weak link. But who'd seen the car? And how could anyone know they'd end up at the lake? The only way would be if they'd been followed.

He checked his watch. Five past ten.

"Woffler?" he called out. "Hey, Woffler?"

The dark wall of trees sighed back.

He cupped his hands. "Woffler!"

His voice echoed back, distant and lost.

He shined his flashlight into the woods, but there was nothing.

"Shit," he muttered.

He turned, went back inside, took a slug of Chivas, took the longest knife he could find from the kitchen and slid it into his belt. Woffler should have taken a weapon. Stupid.

He threw another log on the fire, paced about, picked up the snifter, then put it down without taking another sip. He'd better stay sober; he might need his wits.

He sat down, stood up again. Then he went back out and stood on the porch.

"Woffler! Yo!"

Ten-fifteen. He'd been gone almost half an hour.

This was bullshit.

Heart beating fast, he walked down the steps and headed toward the spot where Woffler had vanished into the trees, shining his light on the ground. It had rained

recently, and the soft ground, covered with a thick carpet of tiny hemlock needles, retained the clear outline of Woffler's footprints, and those of someone else—someone with smaller feet.

"Hey, Woffler!"

In the ensuing silence, he could hear the faint lapping of the lake. He took a few tentative steps into the woods.

A very distant call came drifting back through the trees, so faint he couldn't distinguish it. It wasn't an echo.

"Woffler! Is that you?"

A sound came back—a distant answering cry. But it was high pitched: almost, Perotta thought, like a scream.

"Jesus," he muttered.

He shined his light ahead. The two sets of footprints went off into the trees. He swallowed a little painfully. Might as well hurry up and get this over with.

He began hiking fast, following the tracks. The trail wound between huge tree trunks, and the air smelled of pine pitch and damp earth. Once or twice he passed some boulders, as tall as he was, draped with lichen and moss.

"Woffler!"

Perotta quickened his pace. It was stupid to have sent Woffler out there in the first place. He was a city boy, didn't know the first thing about woods. He was probably lost and panicking.

The footprints began skirting a swamp. An owl hooted off in the darkness.

"Woffler, you coming back or what?"

No answer.

He shined the light around, slapped at a mosquito. The trees stood all around him like massive dark pillars. Where the ground became swampy there were thick mats of sphagnum moss. The footprints ran along the soft verge of the swamp, and then they veered in sharply, becoming holes where the feet had sunk through the moss into the mud.

"Jesus." He stopped. Why would Woffler go into the swamp like that?

He shined the light around again, and saw something white, like a mushroom, at the edge of the swamp. He took a step closer. It wasn't a mushroom, after all. It was a shell, a white oyster shell. He bent over and picked it up, then immediately dropped it again, horrified at the rubbery feel.

It fell on the moss, upside down. From this angle, he could see that blood was smeared along one side. It was fresh blood, shiny and intensely red in the glare of the flashlight. Heart pounding, Perotta picked up a stick and turned it over.

It was an ear. A human ear, severed at the stump, with a gold earring through the lobe, set with a red stone.

With an involuntary moan, Perotta took a single step back. It was like a bad dream, the kind of nightmare where something strange and terrible was happening but you were paralyzed, unable to move, unable to get away, no matter how hard you tried.

And then, suddenly, he found movement. With a sharp cry he ran wildly, blindly, through the trees, crashing through brush, clawing through ferns.

He ran and ran until he could run no more, and then he fell. He lay on the sodden ground, breathing so hard his sides burned and he moaned with each

exhale, the loamy smell filling his nostrils, choking him. He clawed his way back up and turned around and around, playing the light over the tree trunks. He had no idea where he was; he'd lost the trail. And now he remembered the kitchen knife. He fumbled at his belt, drew it out.

"Woffler!" he screamed. "Where are you? Answer me!"

Nothing.

He played the light over the ground. The ground was heavy with pine needles here, and there were no footprints. Like a goddamn idiot, he'd gotten himself lost. Even if he'd wanted to, there was no way he could retrace his trail.

He tried to calm his pounding heart, get his hyperventilating under control. It probably was Lipski, after all. That was the only answer. Maybe the little shit had suspected them from the beginning, followed them all the way up. That would explain the small footprints.

Shakily, he began to walk downhill, in the direction he hoped would lead him back to the lake. If he could find the shore, he'd be able to see the lights of the cabin and find his way back to the car and get the hell out.

He saw a sudden movement, a flutter of white, through the trees.

"Woffler?"

But he knew it wasn't Woffler.

"I'll cut you!" he screamed, backing up, brandishing the knife. "Don't come near me!"

He turned and ran away from the fluttering movement, slashing through waist-high ferns. He ran and ran and then stopped again, heaving for air, shining the light around wildly, turning and turning.

Another flutter of white.

"Get away from me!" He backed up against a tree, the yellow beam of his flashlight jerking and flitting about the trunks.

"Lipski, look. You can have the knife, it's in the toilet tank inside the cabin. Go ahead. Just leave me alone."

Silence.

"Lipski, you hear me?"

The forest was so silent. Even the wind had ceased breathing in the hemlocks. The cloying smell of wet moss and rotting wood filled his nostrils.

"I was stupid. I admit it. *Please.*" He gave a choking sob.

He heard a faint sound and saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly, a bloody hand shot around from behind the tree and seized his shirt.

"Get away from me!" he screamed, flailing his arm and slashing with his knife, wrenching himself free, his shirt buttons popping. He backed away from the tree, shakily holding the knife out ahead of him, his shirt open and hanging loose. "Don't do this to me, Lipski," he choked out. "Don't."

But now he wasn't sure it was Lipski.

The flashlight. He had to turn it off. He had to get away, move in darkness. He started walking, not fast, and turned the light off. But the deep blackness of the forest seemed to smother him, and a feeling of dread and terror overwhelmed him, and he snapped it back on.

Perotta caught sight of something low to one side. He swung the beam over in a panic, thinking it was the attacker, crouching and ready to spring. He stopped, frozen by horror at what the flashlight revealed.

The beam illuminated a very white foot, severed at the ankle. Perotta stumbled back with a retching sound. The beam jumped from that to another thing lying on the pine needles: an arm. And farther on, two-thirds of a head, cleaved at an angle, with one halfway forced-out eye, white showing all around.

The other piece of the head lay some feet away, with the second staring, surprised-looking eye.

“Oh, *Jesus!* No, no!”

A voice came from behind him, and he swung around with an inarticulate gargle. But there was nobody there; the voice seemed disembodied, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once, as if the demonic forest itself were speaking. In the extremity of his horror Perotta turned around and around, unable to get a fix on it.

“That’s what they do to them, you know,” the voice was saying, soft and hoarse. “Take a good look—that’s what they do to them. And now, that’s what *I’m* going to do to *you*.”

Lieutenant Vincent D’Agosta, NYPD, watched the M.E. place the last piece of victim number two in a wet evidence container. It had taken them quite a while to sort through which piece belonged to who. The hot summer sun barely filtered through the branches of the tall hemlocks, creating a green, humid atmosphere that reeked of death. The flies had arrived in force and a steady drone filled the cathedral-like woods, like a low undertone to the hiss of radios and the murmur of the forensics team as they did the final walk-through before closing down the scene.

D’Agosta heard the soft press of footsteps and turned to see the local cops coming back up the hill.

“They were staying in the McCone cabin,” one of them said. “We got their wallets, IDs, car, the works. Two employees of the Natural History Museum.”

“Yeah?”

“Looks like we’re almost done here. Thanks for coming up so quickly, Lieutenant.”

“Appreciated the call,” said D’Agosta.

“We heard on the radio about that heist at the museum,” the other cop said. “When we found that artifact in the tank, we put two and two together and figured you’d be interested.”

“Yeah.” D’Agosta looked down. “Interested.”

“Is that golden knife really worth millions?” the first officer asked, trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

D’Agosta nodded.

“Looks like they double-crossed the wrong person.”

“Maybe,” D’Agosta said. *But this took work*, he thought to himself. *A whole lot of work. You could send a message with a lot less effort. And why was the artifact still in the toilet tank? That was the first place anyone would look.*

The M.E. began carting the body bags and evidence lockers back out toward the road. It had been a long day.

“Let’s get back to the station,” the first officer said. “Finish up the paperwork. Once that’s been processed and the evidence boys are done, we’ll release the knife to you, Lieutenant.”

D’Agosta stood for a moment, staring at the sticky, torn-up killing ground. It was as if the earth itself had been cut, violated. He fetched a sigh and turned to follow the others. His part was over. The Tumi knife was found. As for the double homicide, it wasn’t his jurisdiction.

On the way out, D’Agosta paused by the first officer. Almost against his will, he said, “This is just the first. There’ll be more.”

The officer looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

D’Agosta nodded back toward the woods. “What happened back there had nothing to do with the museum theft.”

A hesitation, a firming of the mouth. “Thank you, Lieutenant, for your opinion.”

D’Agosta could read the skepticism and annoyance in the officer’s eyes. With a sudden feeling of weariness, he turned and walked toward the car and driver that would take him back to the local airfield, where his NYPD chopper was standing by. Suddenly, he couldn’t wait to get back to New York City: to the heat-packing crackheads, ATM-camera flashers, Hummer-driving pimps, two-dollar murderers, turnstyle jumpers, grandmother decapitators, three-card-monte scammers, nightclub arsonists, hit-and-run stockbrokers, dog rapists and all the other freaks he knew so well and loved. Anything was better than these woods—and this killer.

The Fisherman sat behind the wheel of his VW bus, waiting in the muddy turnout at the side of the road. The police cars had come and gone, and now the road from Waldo Falls was silent. It was twilight and a layer of mist had formed, drifting through the trees, beading up on his windshield.

He adjusted his wig, pulling it down tighter, grasping the long locks of polyester hair and giving them a tug. Then he lit up a Marlboro and waited.

It was a while before a pair of yellow headlights appeared, heading out of town. He stubbed out his cigarette and watched the car materialize in his rearview mirror. It was a foreign car, a Toyota, which was good. They would buy Jap over American.

As the car passed it honked.

The man waited until the taillights had disappeared around the gentle curve. Then he put the VW into gear, started up the windshield wipers and eased it onto the road. He allowed himself a slow, crooked smile, and a prayer of thanks to the Lord for once more presenting the opportunity to serve Him.

The Fisherman had just hooked another killer of the unborn.

