

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

A scenario about fathers and sons

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Players: 2

GM/Director: 1

Time: 2 hours including warmup and debrief

This is a scenario about fathers and sons. It is about the distance and intimacy we experience with our parents and children, the deep love we share, the terrible frustrations we have with each other, and most of all, about the regret and shame that we hold in our hearts when we cannot say to the other what we feel - and then it is too late.

Two men - an old man and his grown son, or a grown man and his ageing father, depending on how you're looking at it - sit in a fishing boat, as they have done many times when the son was a boy. They are closer to each other than they think. Each of them is disappointed in the other in some way, and proud of the other in some way. They know, deep down, that each of them loves the other one unconditionally. What they're not sure about is whether the other actually likes them: as a person, as a man, as someone who also is a part of them.

The style of play

The game is meant to be very quiet, and for a dramatic situation, may feel incredibly slow. The two players will spend most of their time sitting in the boat, and having small conversations. The GM or Director can talk with each character as a kind of inner voice. Occasionally, fish will bite or be scared away, changing the emotional atmosphere (more on that later). Give yourselves time as players and director to settle in and do not rush. The inner life of the characters is at least as important as what is said out loud. Also, too much talking will scare the fish away.

This scenario is intended to be emotionally challenging and may hit close to the bone.

On timings

The times given in this text are a guide - if the game plays out in 30 minutes or 2 hours, it doesn't matter. They're here as a guideline and for those who may have to stick to a schedule, and to ensure that enough time is given to the debrief.

On gender and age

This game can be played by anyone, but the two characters are a father and a son. If one of the players is a parent, they should play the father. If neither or both are, the older player should play the father.

On playing close to home

Feel free to play as close as you like to yourself. Feel free to play yourself, or your father, or your son. Feel free to not play close to home at all. Given that both players will be improvising a good deal of backstory during the game, it's very likely that many of the things that come up will be at least semi-autobiographical. So, you know, be sensitive about that with your fellow players. It can be really effective and fun to sort of remix and exaggerate feelings and events from your own experience - and it can up emotions you didn't even know you had. Have fun with it.

TOOLS FOR PLAYING:

1) Scaring the fish away

If the father and son argue to the point where they raise their voices, the fish are scared away. The director says “you’ve scared the fish away.” Nobody may speak for three minutes, at which point the director will say “the fish are biting again” to indicate that players may talk. As the director, use this with care - allow the characters to get into it for a bit before you cut the conversation.

The director can also use this tool when he or she wishes to cool down or redirect some other kind of behaviour. The players may not know what exactly scared the fish away, only that they’re gone for some reason.

2) Catching a fish

The director may say “You’ve got a fish!” to the father or the son. Both players react and try to get the fish reeled in - fish are strong, stubborn beasts when they don’t want to be caught! They should decide whether it’s worth keeping.

3) The decline and death of the father:

In the last 10-15 minutes of the game, the director will say “the fish aren’t here anymore,” which indicates that the father is close to death.

The father may then only speak **two more times**, and each time he speaks, he may only use **ONE breath** to say what needs to be said. He can either initiate conversation or answer the son, but he can only speak for a total of two more breaths.

After that, the player playing the father gets up from the chair and moves away, to become audience. The son may continue to talk if he wishes. When the director feels that the time is appropriate to end, he or she ends the game.

4) The director as inner voice

The director is also a kind of imaginary friend or inner voice or therapist to both of the characters. In order to flesh out the back story and the inner worlds of both of the characters, the director can hold little interviews with them, one at a time, for as long as it takes to find a story (or to discover that there’s no story to be found). The other player hears this inner monologue, but their character does not. In this way during

the game we get a sense of the rich inner world of both the father and the son, so when they speak or fail to speak to each other, we gradually feel the weight behind their words, without them having to communicate a great deal directly.

Use this tool judiciously; be a storyteller.

What kind of a man is your father/son?
What do you think he thinks of you?
What do you think he thinks of himself?
How does it make you feel to be around him?
Etc etc...

5) Points of conflict (optional):

Some players may prefer to come up with the backstory entirely through improvising, but if you prefer, you can come up with some potential conflicts beforehand and play a more “transparent” game. This can also be used if a player would prefer to avoid playing on a particular topic and take it *off the table* entirely.

They don't all have to be incredibly personal. Try examples like:

Political differences - Divorce - Career choices - Choice of partner - Sexual orientation - Betrayal - Finances, family business or inheritance - Siblings - Raising children - Physical abuse or other maltreatment - Addiction - What makes for a life well lived - Sporting rivalries

PLAYING THE GAME: SETUP AND CHARACTERS, 30 min

Choose who plays the father and the son.

Give them names, if you wish. Otherwise use “dad” and “son” when referring to each other.

Use this list of adjectives - or any that you come up with - to pick a couple attributes you’d like for your character.

Sportsman	Supportive	Strict
Authoritarian	Detail-oriented	Teacher
Independent	Cruel	Curious
Troubled	Funny	Amoral
Has an illness	Devoted	Lazy
Conservative	Loving	Lenient
Hippy	Workaholic	Resentful
Violent	Intellectual	Admiring
Leader	Distant	Artistic
Life of the party	Physical	Repressed
Eccentric	Money-oriented	Boring
Unfair	Ungrateful	Ashamed
Cool	Driven	LGBT and/or Q
		..etc etc etc...

Players and director answer the following together:

The father is 70 years of age.

Is he still married? What was/is the son’s mother like?

How many kids does he have?

What did he do for a living?

Is he healthy?

What does he spend most of his time doing these days?

What was his childhood like? (Grew up in the country/city, relationship with own family)

In what ways did he bring up his children like his father did? What did he do differently?

In what ways has his son turned out the same as him?

The son is 35 years of age.

Is he married? With kids?

What does he do for a living?

Is he healthy?

What does he spend most of his time doing (work, hobbies, interests)?

What was his childhood like?

In what ways is he similar to his father?

In what ways would he bring up his children the same? What would he do differently?

Decide on 2-3 points of conflict if you so wish and briefly fill out some backstory together. Keep an eye on the time; just give yourself enough backstory so that the players feel comfortable that they can jump in and create this story together.

Do a short warmup: take an incident from the past that you've just talked about and act it out briefly - either as a scene, or a phone call, or a frozen tableaux if you like. Just to get the imagination started. If you need a scenario, there's always birthday party, driving lesson, arguing about grades, etc.

Last 5 minutes prep:

The players write down some questions they'd like their character to ask the other. At least one, maximum 3. It should be a fairly current, low-key question you can use to start conversation at the beginning of the game. Underneath each question, *write why your character wants to know this.*

Set up the space.

The minimum is two chairs and two poles of some kind. The chairs should be next to each other, facing opposite directions. The fishing pole props are just to give people something to do with their hands.

THE SCENARIO: ABOUT 1 HOUR

When everyone's ready to go, players take their seats and fishing rods.
They close their eyes.

The director sets the scene. Use the text below, or improvise your own as you like.

You're sitting in a small boat in the middle of a lake, a place you've been coming for decades to fish. It's a warm day in September, and the lake is calm as glass. Tiny shifts of weight in the boat make it bobble slightly in the water, and you hear the sound of the water lightly tapping the outside of the hull. On the shore, trees stand poised, with their leaves ripening into brighter and brighter reds, oranges, and golden colours. You've been sitting here for half an hour now, listening to the other man in the boat breathing, both lost in your thoughts. Sometimes in the silence you forget he's there. Sometimes you feel his presence so keenly you want to shout.

In part of your heart, you know this man, and have always known him. And yet sometimes it feels impossible to understand him. You feel like you ought to be able to. There are things you need to know. You wonder why you need to know these things. You wonder why you should still need anything from him. You wonder if there's any point in asking these questions at all. The sunlight trickles down to you and him, silent and together.

You are home with him, whatever home means. It's been a long time since you both had the time to come out here. It is your piece of the world, the two of you.

The fish are biting.

Open your eyes and play.

Remember:

The director can talk with the characters as though it's an inner interview.

"You've scared the fish away" - nobody can talk for 3 minutes.

"The fish are biting again" - players may talk again.

"You've got a fish!" - reel in the catch!

"The fish aren't here anymore" - the father has two more breaths to speak.

The director ends the game at an appropriate time after the death of the father.

DEBRIEF: ABOUT 30 MINS

The players and director should take part in the debrief, as well as anyone who was watching. Try to be scrupulous about using “my character” and “your character said” instead of “I said” and “you said” - it is a bit cumbersome at first, but it helps recalibrate the realms of play and non-play effectively. *Do not skip the debrief*, even if you feel like you weren’t affected by the game. Go through at least the following:

A short break after the game to put yourself in order (about 5 min).

A round of general impressions and feelings about what you just experienced.

A round for the question: “What happened to your character/to the director?”

A round concerning any particular exchanges or interactions that you found particularly affecting, if there were any.

One high point and one low point of the game for you.

Any other feedback that won’t be repressed.

After a debrief, go ahead and call your family. :)