

### 3. *Gone Fishin'*

"NAN, THEY'RE GONE AGAIN! THEY'RE ALL GONE."

I was on the dock near the front of the boathouse, looking down at the big metal washtub. Except for some sand and a couple of flat rocks that stuck above the few inches of water I had poured in, the tub was now empty.

"What do you mean? What are all gone?"

Nan sounded like she really wanted to know. She was sitting in the verandah in her oversized wicker chair with pillows stuffed behind her. She looked like a propped up doll. It was after breakfast and the dishes were done, so she had taken off her apron, kicked off her shoes and plunked her feet on the matching wicker footstool. Her hair was messy as usual. With her reading glasses perched on her nose and her Agatha Christie book resting in her lap, she looked over the glasses and squinted at me through the screen.

"My frogs are all gone," I explained.

Every day for the last four days, I had been getting to know my warty friends once more. It was something to do until Riel and Mokey—my favourite buddies who I shared summer adventures with—showed up. When they weren't around, I made use of my time alone. I'd get to think about a lot of stuff until sometimes I thought I was going to wear my brain out. I'd balance that time of thinking too much by reading or writing or wandering

around, or catching frogs. If it was raining or too cool to play outside, I'd write in my diary or pull out my Mechano set and make a bridge or a goofy-looking building. I did that on the rug in my room above the boathouse. That way Pearl and Maisie wouldn't get in my way. Without the guys around and with all the adults except Nan back in town at work, it was either play on my own or with the two girls. That was an easy decision to make.

It wasn't that I disliked my sister or my cousin. It was just that they were girls and a lot younger than I was. Maybe part of it was that Nan made me play with them. I could only build sandcastles with them for so long. Actually, one of my favourite things to do was to build sandcastles, but they never built theirs the way I wanted them to, so we always seemed to end up fighting. It was just easier to go on a solo frog roundup instead.

"Every morning they're gone. Where do they go? I think somebody's taking them."

"No one's taking them," Nan replied. "They just hop out of the tub while you're asleep. They get away on their own in the night."

"They can't jump out on their own. I watch them a lot and none of them ever jump out while I watch them. Someone's letting them out or stealing them."

Once I accused Mokey of letting them out because I knew he hated frogs. He blamed them for the warts he had on both hands, yet he never touched them. Besides, I played with them all the time and never had a wart anywhere on my body.

"Or maybe some stranger who doesn't like frogs being held captive walked by, saw them and set them free," she added.

Nan always tried to find an excuse that I would agree with, but I never believed one of them. I knew when she was lying. She knew the truth about my frogs, but I could never get her to admit to it.

I had some dandy specimens in that tub. There were teeny ones and tadpoles. There were some big, fat, polka dot toads with lumpy warts on their leathery hides. And there were a few smaller, slimy, skinny green ones. I didn't really like them. They gave me the creeps. I liked them even less than I did the garter snakes I would catch once in awhile as they slithered through the water plants.

It would take me hours every day, wading through the reeds and cattails with my sister's pink tin sand-pail in my left hand. My right hand would be ready to grab my victim before it could hop or swim away. I loved the time I spent on frog hunts. It had to be a calm day in order to see their movements, and I had to be quiet or they wouldn't croak. Mine was a relaxed, quiet stalking, unlike the stiff stalking of a cat. I just wandered about, enjoying the heat of the sun on my shoulders that were usually protected by a T-shirt.

I also loved the feel of the sand under my feet. I often just stood in the ankle-deep

water, wiggling my toes, squirming my feet and twisting my body. I liked to watch my feet and then my ankles disappear under the soft sand. I daydreamed about movies I had seen, where someone would be swallowed by quicksand, and I wondered if it could happen to me.

I had managed to submerge myself almost to my knees once and remembered the fear I felt as I tried to get out of the ooze. It wouldn't let go. I imagined the hands of some denizen of the deep locking onto my ankles, and then I saw the creature's face looking up through the sand with his huge, fishy lips stretched into a smile. I tugged and pulled and grew panicky, almost to the point of tears. I wrenched on my legs, my knees feeling like they were going to pop from their sockets, before suddenly breaking free, only to fall on my rear end in the water. I had nightmares about that a few times.

Mostly, though, frog hunting was a chance to be alone with many of the wonders that could be found at the lake. I would come across nests in the cattails with chicks still in them. I'd back away a bit and crouch down so I was kind of hidden, and wait. Before too long the male or female bird would swoop in and grab hold of the edge of the nest, worms or bugs squirming in their beaks. Only then would I get to tell what kind of a bird it was, since even at this time of the year, some of the chicks were just pink, fleshy lumps with big, yellow beaks, bulging eyes and the odd bunch of feathers sticking out here and there. Their screeches were often bigger than themselves, until their parents stuffed their yawning mouths full of food.

A couple of times, father birds got angry at me for getting too close to their children. I once had a red-winged blackbird dive at me a dozen times or so, and grab at my baseball cap with its claws. I wasn't wearing a hat once and actually ran away screaming when a yellow-headed blackbird pecked me on the head so hard that I bled.

Most of the birds in the cattails were blackbirds, but there were also lots of sparrows, and smaller brown birds that Nan called wrens. Wild canaries, robins, cowbirds, magpies and crows nested in the trees, while other birds, like meadowlarks, made their nests on the prairie. Plenty more kinds, like ducks and grebes, also called the cattails their home.

Lots of other things lived in the rushes too. There were colourful spiders that wove amazing webs, which turned magical when raindrops clung to them. Dragonflies and blue damselflies with long, skinny bodies and big wings of gauze chased each other through the reeds. Tiny, squiggly, bug-like things—some you could see through—made great food for schools of minnows that hid under the water plants. Then there were also loads of snails and snakes and salamanders.

The only enemies I had in this forest-like water were mosquitoes. In the early morning before the breeze whispered through the reeds, or in early evening after the sigh of the

wind had gone to bed, the deadly hum of those needle-nosed bloodsuckers would cause my skin to crawl. Sometimes if I forgot to slather on repellent before I went frog hunting, I would come back to the cottage with so many bites that they would join up and make big welts on the backs of my arms, legs and neck. They would itch so much that I'd scratch them until there were trickles of blood, and then Nan would swab them with calamine lotion to take the burn away. I had always hated mosquitoes.

I hated mosquitoes so much that I would sometimes watch frogs catch them before I would catch the frogs. The frogs or toads would hang from a reed, or sit on a raft of bright green floating plants, or just lay in the water with their heads sticking out, waiting for a cloud of unsuspecting mosquitoes to buzz by. Quick as lightning, their sticky tongues that were twice as long as their bodies would flick way out and then snap back in. After that, I'd only see the wing of a barbed bandit poking out of the frog's mouth. It made me happy because it meant there was one less mosquito to steal my blood.

Once I saw a frog that had somehow caught a big, juicy worm, which was wiggling from its mouth, and I wondered where it could have found it in the cattails. It didn't seem fair, since I had to dig up my fishing worms from the black dirt on the edge of the prairie, a good hike in behind the row of trees that grew along the lake.

It was another super day, which promised a flat lake, sunshine and a good amount of heat. For the time being, I could leave my T-shirt on, but I knew that soon I would be wearing only my bathing suit.

"It's sure a nice day," I called out to Nan. "I think I'll go fishing off the rock at the end of the cliffs today. Will you make me a lunch, please?" I figured I'd give frog hunting a rest for a while.

"Only if you don't go any farther than the rock or bother the people on the Reserve," she said back. "And, only if you promise to stay off the cliffs."

It was her usual lecture. A few kids over the years had climbed up on the cliffs and fallen down, a couple of them hurting themselves badly by breaking a leg or an arm. One guy, older than my buddies and me, fell and cracked his head like a ripped open birthday present. Someone said his brains were smeared all over the rocks that lay at the bottom of the cliffs. I didn't believe that, though, because they rushed him to the hospital in town, and he didn't die or end up slow or anything.

As well as staying away from the cliffs, Nan didn't like us going beyond the rock onto Indian land. It didn't have anything to do with whether she liked Indians or not. She always bought fresh fish from them when they came to the cottage door, and she enjoyed talking to those she met when she made a trip to Pariseau's. And Gramp always bought

his stack of wood from the Indian men, which Nan used for cooking or just burned on those few days it rained and turned cold.

Nan didn't want me or my friends going onto the Reserve because she said it was the Indians' home, and in the same way we didn't like strangers traipsing through our yard, she believed we should show respect by staying out of theirs. Their home seemed tens of miles in size, yet I understood and never let my buddies wander beyond the rock, even though there was always a great temptation to explore new territory.

Actually, the three of us, who Nan called "The Three Musketeers," had only really been to the rock together once. It was a place Gramp had taken me first, and I had shown it to the guys one time, but we never seemed to get around to going there again. For whatever reason, Riel was always the one who said it wasn't worth the effort. I wondered if his not wanting to go had something to do with him being mostly Indian and the rock being on the edge of Indian land. But, I never went around giving it more thought than that. It might have just been easier to ask Riel why he didn't like the place.

"And what else are you not to do?" Nan often ended her lectures with a quiz. And when I went fishing from the rock, the answer she expected had to always be the same.

"I won't go swimming. I promise."

"Good. And get out of the sun every now and then, so you don't get burned," she added.

The reason Gramp and I liked to fish off the rock was because there was deeper water in front of it that had a bed of weeds along its bottom. It was almost for sure that you could catch a Northern Pike, which, for some reason, we always called jackfish. Sometimes it would be a big one. I had caught a seven-pounder there two summers earlier. Then within a half-dozen casts, Gramp pulled in one that was two pounds heavier. Once in a while we'd get lucky and hook a perch or a pickerel. The fishing was good. But because the water was over our heads, Nan didn't want us swimming there—just in case. And this rule was one that I didn't have any trouble following. I didn't want some metal grappling hook pulling my body up from the deep.

I always had to say the words "I promise," or she wouldn't let me go. She believed that if a person promised, they were giving their word, and one of the greatest sins anyone could commit was to go back on their word.

Pearl's voice piped up. Her and Maisie were playing in the sand with little scoops and tiny pails just a ways from me.

"Nan, I want to go with Buddy. I want him to show me how to fish. I 'specially want to see the rock."

The rock was a big, flat-topped boulder that sat in the sand at the very edge of the beach, almost like it could slip into the lake at any time. It was at the end of the cliffs, probably having fallen off them who knew how many years before, and the trip to it was an adventure on its own. Close to a mile from the cottage, it was out of hollering distance if Nan decided to call me. I felt pretty grown up every time she gave me permission to go alone. I figured she let me do that because Gramp told her to. Maybe he felt that if he couldn't be there, and because I would never have a dad to take me, I should learn how to use my time alone and to do it safely.

Nan and I both knew there wasn't much to worry about. The worst that could likely happen was that I might run into a skunk or a porcupine hiding behind one of the bushes I had to walk around, often by wading into the water.

When Rinty was with me, he would warn me by barking if there was something he thought I should know about. His warnings could prove to be more trouble than they were worth, though. During the three summers that he was my best friend at the lake, he had been sprayed exactly three times by skunks. It happened once every summer, as if he had to learn to stay away from the stinky critters all over again each year. Only once did he try bullying a "Porky". It was the one and only time he felt the pain of the quills stabbing into his mouth, and then the even more terrible pain of Gramp snipping the quills and pulling them out with pliers. That was enough to teach Rinty a lesson. Thinking of Rinty not being with me sent floods of sadness squishing through me.

"No, Pearl," said Nan. "You cannot go with Buddy. I told you that you are still too young to go wandering off with your brother. Maybe next year."

"Aw," whined Pearl. "It's not fair."

"Enough of your complaining. Play with Maisie. I'll make you a snack after I've fixed Buddy his lunch."

Nan marked her book and slid her feet into her shoes as she got up. Then she went inside the cottage. Pearl sulked back to her sandcastle. I had been rescued from having my little sister tag along once again.

Gramp called a day like this a bluebird day. The heat of the sun had yet to visit and the sand was cool under my bare feet. In my left hand, I had my bamboo casting rod with reel attached. There was a wax-coated line evenly wound around the reel. In my right hand, I carried a small flour sack that had a drawstring around the top. The sack bulged with a bologna sandwich made with a thick slice of meat, white bread and lots of mustard. Next to peanut butter and jelly, bologna was my favourite sandwich, but when I took my first choice, the jelly used to leak into the sack along the way, and Nan didn't like washing it all

the time. In the bag, there were also three oatmeal-raisin cookies and a green apple. Two Len Thompson, red and white spoons, each with three hooks, dangled from my best ball cap, my burgundy Beavers baseball team cap. Nan made me wear a T-shirt, of course, and my bathing suit was under a pair of old school pants that were cut off just above the knees. I was barefoot, as usual.

The beach ended fairly quickly and I began picking my way around the bushes that grew out into the lake. The bottom was still sandy but with bundles of smaller rocks scattered here and there. They had tumbled down from the cliffs above me. From where I was the cliffs looked like the walls of a castle that no invading army could get up. The cliffs were actually just one long cliff, a hundred-foot wall that came straight down to the lake's edge and ran along it for over a half-a-mile. Swallows darted out and back from their cave-homes in the cliff face, the birds' shiny backs reflecting deep blue in the sunshine. There was no breeze to rustle the field of cattails that grew from the edge of that part of the lake. The green field was about the size of a baseball diamond. Birdsong filled the silence, and the soft sun had already chased the mosquitoes away. It was so easy to breathe, the air almost as delicious as an ice cream float.

It took me about an hour to make it to the rock, not because it was far or because it should take that long. A detour to chase a muskrat through the cattails took a few minutes, and then I sat for at least another fifteen minutes watching two Helldivers dance on an open spot of water within the cattails. Gramp called them grebes, but the Indians had named them Helldivers, and I liked that name better. The water birds were about the size of a small chicken, and must have been mating late, or maybe they were just keeping in practice. They would swim beside each other and then, arching their necks, they would lift their bodies out of the water, spread their wings behind them and run like the devil, side by side across the top of the water. They would race like that for about twenty feet until diving headfirst into the lake at exactly the same time. It was their mating dance, and I had gotten to see it a few times. I never tired of watching.

I was close enough to see their sharp, creamy yellow bills and the dark grey caps on their heads, which looked like triangles and seemed to have ears on them. I could also see their white chins and long white throats, and their beady red eyes. They actually kind of looked like devils from Hell, but their dance was sure pretty.

By the time I took my first cast off the rock, it was mid-morning and not the best time of day for fishing. I should have really started earlier or waited until later in the afternoon if I expected to catch anything. The big ones would have already headed for the cool, deep parts of the lake. I didn't really care, though. It was a beautiful day and was mine to enjoy.

Behind the rock there were no more cliffs. They were replaced by a stand of poplar trees, which wandered away from the lake and climbed gently through the rolling hills. The shoreline opened to a wide, white beach of super soft sand, from which the lake bottom dropped off into dark green water not very far from shore. The beach went on for a fair distance beyond the rock, but then ran into more trees and took a lazy jog to the right to be lost around a corner.

From the rock onwards, the land belonged to the Indians. So the great beach, the forest of poplar trees—which also had jack pines mixed in with them—and the rolling hills were out of bounds. As much as I wanted to explore all of it, I wanted to be able to fish from the rock again, so I respected Nan's wish.

And the fishing could be great. I could stand on the big boulder that hung out over the water, and without worrying about getting tangled in any trees, I could cast out into the deep. The lake was so clear, that I could watch my spoon flashing red, white and silver as I wound the line back onto my reel. I had to be a careful fisherman, though. The weed bed at the bottom of the offshore hole could easily grab the hook of a lazy angler and keep it for its own.

I realized as I looked into the clear green water that Nan never again needed to tell me not to swim there. I was a good enough swimmer to be able to handle deep water, but from the rock I could tell that the beach sloped pretty quickly into real deep stuff. It looked like a slippery slide through light green, then dark green, and finally into blackness. And then there were the weeds. It was one thing to swim in water that was over my head, but what if weeds grabbed my legs when I let them dangle? I got panicky just thinking about it.

I let go with a pretty good cast, and on just my second toss, I was surprised by a solid strike. There was a big tug on the end of the line, and I did exactly what Gramp had taught me to do. I jerked the tip of the rod up and back as fast as I could to set the hook. But then the line went completely slack.

I reeled in to discover that my spoon was gone. I cursed out loud and then quickly looked around to see if anyone had heard me. I felt silly because I knew I was all by myself. But whenever I swore, I felt that way. It was like Mom or Nan or Gramp was peeking from behind a tree, ready to punish me with angry words if I didn't watch my tongue. Swearing was not appreciated in my family, especially if I was the one doing the swearing. Gramp said that if a person swore, it was because they were too ignorant to find better words to express themselves. That still didn't stop him from tossing out a hell or damn once in a while.

I put on my second and last spoon and wondered if I hadn't been quick enough reeling in my line, if maybe some weeds had grabbed it. It didn't seem like it, but fishing

was funny that way. Sometimes I didn't know if I had almost caught "The Big One," or if I had just wasted my allowance by losing a lure to the weeds at the bottom of the lake.

I decided to make the day last. I knew if I lost my only other spoon, I would be angry and probably go back to the cottage early. So I sat on the rock, munched on my bologna sandwich, and watched a flock of white pelicans glide by. They were such big, strong, and yet graceful birds. With their heads almost lying on their backs, their big yellow bills sticking forward and their darker yellow feet tucked under their rumps, they could push smoothly down on the air with their cape-like, black-tipped wings and then glide for what seemed like miles. I loved watching them fish. They would soar just above the lake, brake upwards by dropping their wings and pushing them forward, and then dive headfirst straight down with their bodies stretched into the shape of arrowheads. They would slice into the water and disappear for a brief moment, and then pop up, often with fish wriggling in the elastic throat pouches below their mouths. Pelicans were my favourite lake bird and they were much better fishermen than I was.

The day was heating up. My apple was juicy enough, but after the crumbly oatmeal cookies, I needed to take a drink from the lake. It also gave me an excuse to hang over the rock and stick my ugly mug into the water to get cool. As I dunked my face in and sipped, I opened my eyes and looked into the underwater world. In slow motion, and no farther away than what seemed the length of my body, right in front of me appeared a demon of the deep—a jackfish bigger than I had ever seen before! It had to be a whole bunch bigger than the thirty-eight pound giant that Mr. Franklin, Gramp's engineer friend, had caught in his boat while fishing over the drop two summers before.

I leaped up and scrambled back from the rock, fearful that the monster fish would swim right up after me and carry me back to the depths with him. I may have screamed something too, but had no idea what. I couldn't remember feeling such fear before. I stood there panting, feeling my eyes bulge from their sockets. I ignored the water that was dripping into them off my hair as I searched for him in the clear, green water. Sure enough, he was still there, just swaying lazily like a submarine being moved by some slow, invisible current. He was still aimed straight at me, and big enough to cause a chill to pick at my every bone, just like he might pick at my bones if he got me down into his world. Or, like he could have done to Joey and Francis, if the searchers hadn't found the corpses when they did.

I could see every part of his huge body. The mix of really dark and light green bands across his back blended perfectly into the weeds below, yet his torpedo shape was clearly outlined. His body moved just a bit snake-like, and that scared me even more. The fins on his back and tail wiggled as if they were tickling the water. And his eyes, golden

yellow with big black centres, kept looking at me. They stuck out on each side of his wide head, and because he was aimed in my direction, I couldn't believe he was able to look at me the way he was.

He flicked his head slightly and I saw a line of teeth on both his upper and lower jaw that were just like—but sharper than—an alligator's. Then I noticed something else that wiggled and caught the light. A red and white spoon dangled from the side of his pointed, angry-looking jaw. My red and white spoon!

He had come to get me, to get even for hurting him, for teasing him with fake food, for believing I could win a battle over him.

I was stuck to the rock. I hoped that if I didn't move, he might not notice me. He might not notice me and might not rear up out of his world to scoop me off the rock and take me into some deep underwater cave in the middle of the lake where he would tear my body to shreds. Maybe he wouldn't crunch my bones into little pieces with his jagged teeth and let his children feed off what was left. If only I didn't move. But then again, I couldn't move!

We stayed like that for what seemed forever, though it was probably only for a minute or two at the most. He swayed just under the surface, not six feet from his edge of the rock, and I stood trembling in the sun, not six feet from my edge. The two of us seemed stuck.

Finally he opened his mouth and showed me his jaw that I already knew was lined top and bottom with long, pointed white teeth. As though he was letting it go with a gentle burp, he then spit out my red and white spoon and it drifted, like an out-of-control kite spinning to the ground, down to the bottom of the lake a couple of feet below. Then he snapped his head to his left and, whipping his tail like a swatter slapping at a fly, he was gone.

I discovered I had been holding my breath. I let go of my air with a rush and began panting, like I remembered Rinty doing whenever he would come back from chasing a bush rabbit. The jackfish was gone and I was safe. I wasn't going to be drowned and eaten and die a terrible death. He had spared me.

Fear left me and slid down my body in beads of sweat. I could feel my body parts start to move on their own. My fingers unclenched from tightly closed fists. My tongue licked dry teeth and lips. The cheeks on my bum relaxed. I needed to pee.

I turned, stepped off the rock and peed in the safety of the bushes, away from the demon in my lake.

I heard the voice at exactly the same time as I saw its owner standing behind a chokecherry bush right in front of me.

The surprise caused my heart to stop all over again.