

Gone Fishing

He walked down the path, his bare feet kicking up dust. His eyes were drawn to the fields. Beans were wilted corn blades curled up. Creek almost down to a trickle. Well, was down to just a few feet. His daddy said this was the longest they went without rain since '36.

“That was one dry summer. “He said looking up as if the answer to their problem written on the white ceiling of the kitchen. White because his mother washed it two times a year, once in the spring and again in the fall.

“It was dry in 42,” His mother said. “Had to watch the wash fire les it git away. Welborn’s did and it bout burn their house.”

“Yup, you best be careful with them fires. Or we won’t have a place left.” His daddy said.

Dry or not, he had hoed the soybeans all morning. Like to burnt up with the sun blazing on his back. Lest it wasn’t like in the spring. Then his mother rubbed Bacon grease on his sunburn. Done that every spring until his skin tanned.

He grinned down at the dog trotting beside him. Molly had spent the morning under the shade of a sycamore. When he first started out the leaves of the beans were a little damp with dew. The dog followed him through the first few rows. As they came to the fence at the end of the field, she deserted him in favor of the cool shadow of the tree.

Two times during the morning she went down to the stream that ran past the field at the bottom of the hill. The water formed a small pool only a few inches crossed, but enough for a thirsty dog.

“Plenty of water in the Blue Hole, he told the dog. Molly just wagged her tail. Maybe I’ll do some skinny dippin’ that is if’n they ain’t nobody round.”

As if she understood Molly danced around in front of the boy. That is, until the squirrel jumped out of the brush ahead of them.

Molly and the squirrel saw each other as the same instant. With a joyful bark, the dog gave chase. The squirrel for his part didn’t seem worried. Letting the dog come within a few feet, the squirrel scampered up a tree. Rearing on the trunk of the oak, Molly looking up barked. On a limb overhanging the path, the squirrel chattered away, scolding the dog.

Watching the exchange, the boy laughed. Passing under the oak, he said. “Come on, girl, there’ll be more squirrels ahead.” With one last look at the squirrel, the dog ran after the boy.

He chose a spot under the shade of a large willow, its branches extended over the pool. The water would be at least fifty foot deep. The pool caused by the whirling of the river in flood season. Setting down the sweet pea can, he selected a long meaty earthworm. it wiggled, not wanting to be pierced by the hook.

“Don’t blame you, wormy, but I gotta have bait or they don’t bite and your it.” He said apologetically. the dog sniffed the worm and turned up her nose. The boy laughed. “Bet we don’t smell any better to him.” Molly backed off and lay down, her eyes on the boy. Having accomplished the task of baiting the hook, the boy picked a place where the sunlight filleted through the willow leaves.

Tossing the line into the water, he plopped down and leaned back to the trunk of the willow. One eye on the bobber, he opened the dinner pail his mother sent with him.

As he reached for the sandwich, his mother’s words come back to him. “Now mind you wash your hand fore you eat this sandwich.” She said. “I know your gonna handle them worms fore you eat.”

He could have just told her he washed his hands, but he wasn’t that kind of boy. Smelling the food, Molly got to her feet. “I gotta wash my hands.” He said to the dog closing the pail. He wedged the pole in a snake hole, then knelt at the edge of the pool.

Dipping his hands in the water, he took his eyes off the cane pole. “I guess mom will be proud of seeing I wash...” The pole bent alarmingly, shot out of the snake hole and trailed across the grass. Molly leaped to her feet, barking and following the pole. The boy made a wild drive for it as it sailed past him. Missing, he dove into the water. Grasping the fishing pole, he held it in one hand and swam with the other. The catfish surfaced; its head as big as the boy’s. Frantically, it made for the bottom of the pool. A strong swimmer, the boy was no match for the fish. Sputtering, he held on, reluctant to lose the fish but more importantly his fishing pole.

The fish headed for the deeper parts of the river. He had to let go if he held on, he would drown. He felt a tug on the back of his overalls. He looked behind him. Molly, her face filled with determination, swam backward, her feet churning through the water. Slowly, inch by inch, they made their way to the surface. Finally, the boy felt the sand under his bare feet. He coughed, spitting out water. He made the bank backing up until he was on solid ground. Satisfied her master was safe, Molly set down by his side. Digging in his heels, the boy fought the fish. After several minutes, the catfish tiring allowing the boy to pull it in.

Exhausted, the boy starched out his toe at the fish’s tail. The head of the of the catfish measured to his chin. He grinned at the dog. “You saved my life... and the fish. He said, how we gonna get him home?”

Molly smiled. Shaking her coat, she showered the boy with droplets of water. He sputtered. “Just what I didn’t need another bath.”

Taking off his belt, he looped it around the catfish’s tail. Pole over one shoulder, belt and dinner pail in the other hand, he started for home. It took him five tries to make it to the farm. Setting down resting then going at it again. Where he could, he dragged the fish through the grass other times on the dirt path. Reaching the house, he set down on the well curb.

“What in the world do we have here?” His daddy said walking up from the barn lot. Taking off his work gloves, he knelt and ran his hand over the scales.

“Fish.” The boy said, breathing heavy.

“And what a fish. You catch this?”

” Me and Molly.” The boy said. His daddy took off the belt and handed it to his son.

“Oh, my.” His mother said from the door to the kitchen. “That’s the biggest fish I ever saw. What are we going to do with it?”

“We’re gonna clean it. Then I’ll pack some in the icehouse. We’ll eat the rest.” His father said, grinning.

“I’ll have to cut it in several small pieces.” His mother said, “Might have to use two frying pans.”

“ We best get at it, come on son you too Molly since you helped catch it you can help clean it.” They hung the fish from the barn door. Before they started his daddy measured it.

“Four feet two inches. Wow we that’s some fish.”

By the time they finished cleaning the fish, the boy was exhausted. Yet he managed to eat three heaping plates of catfish.

His parents were finishing their coffee when the rain started. Going to the open door, they watched the rain soaking the fields.

“Guess there won’t be no work in the beans tomorrow if this ra...” The boy was sound asleep, his head resting beside his plate. Molly, her chin on the boy’s knee, looked up at them.

“I think I’ll put our little fisherman to bed.” He said picking up his son he carried him to his bedroom. Undressing the boy, he tucked him in. From the doorway, his mother watched. “Think he’ll go fishin’ tomorrow.” She asks.

“Probably.” His father said, closing the door. Molly jumped on the bed and snuggled up to the boy. Later that night, the boy woke to the drumming of rain on the roof. Smiling, he patted the dog and went back to sleep.