

Fish out of Water

By Karla LANDELLS

"Oh, just give it to me. Here, I'll show you," said my older sister Tonya, yanking the fishhook and wriggling worm from my timid hands.

"Don't be such a wimp. There," she said forcing the tiny body onto my jagged hook. "Now cast it."

I remember the sound of her voice with all its annoyance. Tonya was a brave, stubborn child. Some people dubbed her a 'tomboy.' My father said she had 'guts.' To me, then, she was just another schoolyard bully waiting for the perfect moment to embarrass and hurt me.

"Wimp," she muttered. She always called me a wimp but I wasn't. I didn't want to impale a live thing on a small but monstrous-looking hook only to drown or be chewed upon by speckled sunfish no bigger than my thumb. It was cruel. I remember thinking about the plaque hanging over my grade primary teacher's desk that said, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I tried. I still try.

"Why can't I use bread crumbs or corn instead? Mom said corn works best," I said, looking down at the torn carcass on my hook.

"Because," she huffed, "it'd float to the top. You'd never catch anything. Just put your line in the water."

Tonya cast her line with the quick flick of her wrist, sending the nylon line out deep. I stared a little longer at my crumpled worm.

With a sigh I cast my line, sending it with a plop into the water only a few feet from the shore, where I stood disappointed. It didn't matter though. I didn't really want to catch anything. The fish in our little lake were small and most likely uneatable. Tonya and I found a dead raccoon in the lake that spring. What was left of its body was entangled in a branch, half submerged near the opposite shore.

I set down my makeshift alder-branch fishing pole, wandered over to the longer grass and hunkered over some wild flowers – Devil's Paint Brushes, I think. All the while keeping my eyes on the cattle.

"Where are you going?" shouted Tonya. "You can't leave you pole here alone. You might catch something."

"I don't feel like fishing anymore," I shouted back, preferring to sit amongst the plush grass and watch her cast and recast her real line on her real crimson pole. I used brown yarn on a stick.

"Well, if you don't want to fish, take your pole and go up to the house. I'm not babysitting you."

Even at eight years old Tonya had a dominant personality. Nothing stopped her. She was fearless.

Tonya had stopped casting her line, letting her hook bob in the murky yellow water. I watched with my pole stilled beside my legs.

"I got something," she shouted, her hands and arms in action, tugging in her prize.

I ran to the edge of the water, expecting a branch to bob to the surface, entangled in her line. But it was too heavy for that, she was struggling. I could see it in her face. Tonya hauled up the end of her line pulling out a thick yellow-green eel. It looked so much like a snake. I was scared of snakes, too. But she wasn't scared of it. She grabbed its body, it tried hard to break away. Tonya tore the hook from its mouth and held its head up to her meet hers.

"I caught an eel! Look!" she shoved it in my direction. I shrieked and jumped back. She laughed.

"It's fat. I bet it's pregnant," she decided.

"Throw it back," I said, timidly, wanting the thing away from me.

"No way! It's mine. I caught it."

She turned it over on its belly and squeezed it hard downward with her thumb. It stopped squirming. It looked dead. She squeezed harder and it thrashed against her forearms, begging for release.

"Don't! You're hurting it" I pleaded.

"I'm going to kill it anyway, what does it matter."

She squeezed again, harder, milking the thing. Sludgy-brown squirted out of its lower body.

"Gross!" she shrieked, laughing. "Eel shit."

She emptied the dying thing of its personal bile and reached for a heavy rock. She held its head against a flat stone and swung the rock, striking the eel hard. It was still alive, but badly hurt. Its child captor pounded it over and over. But it

refused to relent. Both its eyes had been beaten and squished from their red sockets.

"It won't die. I'll have to chop its head off. Come on," she said to me, over her shoulder.

I felt guilty for not pleading more for its life. I wanted it to stop hurting. I wanted to put it back in the water. Tonya ran toward our house, charging with the green body flailing in her hand. I trotted behind her, wading through the tall grass, carefully avoiding cow patties and thistles.

"Mom! I caught an eel!" I could hear her yelling. I caught up to Tonya at the edge of the barbwire fence near the horse corral. We walked the rest of the way together.

Our mother was kneeling in one of her strawberry gardens, pulling up weeds when we approached. Ann was seated in the dirt beside her, picking and eating the plump berries Mom laboured over.

"Look Mom," Tonya laughed, holding up her catch. Our mother jumped and screeched, scooping up our little sister, running to the veranda.

"Get it away from me!" She was terrified of snakes, frogs, even worms bothered her.

"But it's not a snake Mom, it's an eel. And I caught it! Karla didn't catch anything."

Our mother shivered and stood back. She set Ann on the veranda beside her feet.

"I don't care what it is. It's ugly. Get rid of it." Her skin was crawling she said.

"But Mom, Dad can eat it for supper," she smiled triumphantly. Then, "It won't die. I tried hitting it with a rock but it didn't work. Cut its head off for me, please," Tonya pleaded. "I want to clean it." I think she honestly believed she was doing a good thing, doing her part to contribute to the family, like any provider would.

"No one's eating that thing. Put it back in the lake."

"No mom, it's hurt, we have to kill it so it'll stop hurting," I could feel my eyes welling up. Her face fell. Mom felt sorry for it, and me too I think. She knew I wanted it to stop hurting (she used to embarrass me by telling people I had a big heart). Horrified and disgusted, she stomped away into the house. Tonya, Ann

and I sat on the faded green veranda and waited. Tonya picked carelessly at the chipping paint. Mom emerged from the house, cradling her big kitchen knife, the one she used for chopping vegetables.

"I'm not touching it Tonya," she said. "Hold it down and keep it still."

She did. The blade came down hard, but didn't go through the eel's head. My mother shrieked, letting go of the knife and running back a few feet, her fingers fluttering wildly up beside her ears. The eel squirmed violently, the knife resting upright, its blade just inside the skin. I thought Mom would cry. She picked up the knife and hit it harder. She hacked it again. The knife penetrated bone this time. It was bleeding. I remember watching its mouth open and close, gulping air hard.

"Gross! Mum! The knife didn't go all the way through! Kill it!" Tonya winced and stared.

"It's not dead! Kill it!" I whimpered.

"I'm trying!" She tried to steady herself.

"It's torture," I mumbled. She looked back at me over her shoulder and knelt down over the eel, picking up the knife.

"Move Tonya," she said. "Let go." My mother held down the tired and bloodied little body with her shaking hand that was still encased in its flower-speckled gardening glove. The knife came down quick and hard, hitting the wood underneath the eel's body, pinning it to the veranda.

"There," she shook, putting down the knife and peeling off her soiled gloves with the tips of her thumb and forefinger. "It's dead. Tonya, get rid of it."

"Will you clean it for me?" she asked.

"No. Get rid of it."

I was relieved it was dead. Tonya stood looking at her mangled trophy, unsure what to do with its wasted carcass. Dad wouldn't be eating it. Mom wanted Tonya to throw it away, so did I. She didn't. It remained, baking in the sun, its green, iridescent skin lost its shimmer, its blood seeped into the veranda floorboards, marking the spot like the chalk outline of a murder victim.