

Fishbone, Gramps 'n Me

by Rexford A. Roberts

Some memories are timeless, especially the memory of the last fishing trip that my grandfather ever took. Now, only three things were of any importance to Gramps: God, the family, and an ancient trout named "Fishbone." I recall how we sat on the edge of the day bed hauling on hip rubbers at 4 o'clock in the morning. It was still dark outside.

"You and me is sneakin' off this mornin', bye. We got us a real special fish to catch," he said, with a wink of his eye and that crinkly, perpetual smile on his weathered face.

Being nine years old made me feel excited to be part of the conspiracy. "You goin' after Fishbone again, Gramps?"

"That's right, me bye," he replied. "And this time yer goin' with me."

"But the doctor said you wasn't supposed to do no more long walkin' in the woods, Gramps. I heard Mom sayin' to Gran." I still remember how frail he looked. But, in retrospect, I guess frailty didn't do much to limit his spirit.

"Then yer worse than the women to be listenin'. That's why we be's up early. We'll git out before they gits up," said Gramps.

So, off we trudged, four miles across bog and barren, an 81-year-old "salt" and a wide-eyed young lad trying to figure out what was so special about a fish. It was just coming on daybreak.

The reddish horizon cast a gentle light on the blackish-green spruce trees along the edge of the damp bog. My boots made squelching sounds as I pulled them from the suction of the black bog mud. I watched as Gramps moved slowly, with great effort to get through; but there was a look of determination on his face that said no bog was going to hold him back.

"That's it!" cried Gramps. "Up ahead."

There it was—through the clearing at the end of the bog—a cold, deep black pool of water, stuck in the middle of nowhere. It looked almost forbidding.

"I'll tell ye a secret, Mikey. I been comin' here the last three years tryin' to catch that wily ole fish."

"Fishbone?" I asked.

"Yup," said Gramps. "Fishbone. Sly! I tried every trick in the book and do he take the blessed hook? No, sir. Do he take the blessed fly? No, sir. He don't take nutting. Never seen the like!"

"Is he very big, Gramps?" I was getting pretty interested.

"Big? My son, he's the biggest ole trout I ever seen in me life. I allow he runs about thirty-five pound or more. Watch!"

With that, Gramps reached into the bait can and plucked out a worm. With a heave of his arm, he flung it high, out over the pool. I'll never forget it. The surface of the water broke with a mighty splash and a huge, brownish-red tower lunged upward, its great hungry jaws snatching and devouring the worm in mid-air! With a sharp slap that shattered the silence of the mist, the great fish crashed back into the water leaving a whitish foam in its wake.

"Holy! Holy smoke, Gramps! Did you see that? Did you see it?"

Gramps was shaking. "I seen 'im all right. I seen 'im. Thirty-five pounds of 'im! He was laughin' at me. Laughin! Did ya see 'im?"

I was pretty excited by now. "C'mon, Gramps. Catch 'im! Get your line out. Catch 'im!"

"Whoa, Mikey. Hold yer horses, bye. This ain't no ordinary fish. We gotta be really sly now. He won't take no hook, no line, no nuthin'," Gramps muttered in disgust.

"How you gonna catch 'im, Gramps?"

I remember he just smiled at me.

"Tickle 'im, bye!"

I was totally confused. "Tickle 'im?"

"That's right," said Gramps. "Now just you watch. Stand there and don't make no sound no matter what I does or how long she takes."

With that, Gramps shuffled painfully out into the water, up to the knees of his thigh rubbers. He slowly spread his feet apart and bent over, his

hands hanging just above the surface. Then the wait began. To a nine-year old boy, any time standing still was agony. Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. It seemed like hours. Then, I saw it. A shadow surged past his boots. It made another pass. Gramps didn't move. Not a hair. Another pass. Then, a strange thing. It stopped. Right in front of Gramp's boots. I could see the huge, quivering mass just beneath the surface. I wanted to cry out but a stern look from Gramps made me stay quiet.

Then, slowly, with agonizing deliberation, he lowered his leathery, veined hands into the water and encircled them beneath the reddish belly of the great fish. My mind was screaming. Grab 'im! Grab 'im! With timeless, infinite patience, my grandfather's hands moved slowly, carefully up and down just beneath the belly of ole Fishbone. His palms were making slow, subtle almost imperceptible contact with the fish. One forever became another. Then, with a rush, a heave, a surge and a roar, Gramps hurled the great body of the fish out of the pool—all thirty-five pounds of blackish-red flesh striking me full in the chest, knocking me clean off my feet!

"EEEEYAHOOOO!!" came the great bellow from Gramps. Don't ever let them tell you that old people can't move. Before I was on my feet, Gramps was out of the pool, with his grizzly hands wrapped in a death grip around the magnificent Fishbone.

"Got 'im. By God! We got 'im!" he shouted.

"He's... he's humungus! He's the biggest fish I ever seen. Wait'll they see 'im. You beat 'im. You whupped 'im, Gramps!"

"Yes, bye! I beat 'im all right!" His eyes were shining. He was beside himself with excitement. The fish continued to struggle vainly, its eyes bulging under the strain of captivity.

"Quick, Mikey. Git me that stick!" Gramps shouted.

Excitedly, I gave it to him. He raised it over his shoulder, aiming for the head of Fishbone. It stopped struggling, as if sensing the inevitability of death. Then, a strange thing happened. Gramps lowered his weapon, slowly, and let it fall by his side. With a great sigh, he carried Fishbone to the water's edge and gently let him go. With a flick of its huge tail, the fish disappeared into the black depths of the pool.

"Gramps! You let 'im go! What'd ya do that for? You let 'im go!"

He just kind of smiled and looked longingly at the water.

"Tell me something, Mikey. Did you think I was goin' to catch 'im?"

I thought for a moment. "No, sir. He was too big and too sly and wouldn't take nothin'."

"And did I catch 'im?" he asked.

"You sure did, Gramps! You sure did!"

"And how did you feel then?"

"I guess I felt real proud of you," I said to him.

"So did I, Mikey, so did I." He paused for a moment and asked, "Do you know how long it takes a fish to grow that big?"

"No, sir," I replied solemnly.

"Well," Gramps went on, "I allow ole Fishbone was older'n you. Why, in fish years I'd say me and Fishbone was 'bout the same age." He paused for a moment. "What do you suppose ole Fishbone wants more than anything in the world?"

I looked at him a while before answering in a small voice. "To be free, sir?"

"That's right, bye. Just like yer ole Gramps. Just like yer ole Gramps."

It wasn't until long after he died and I was almost a man that I understood what he meant.