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One Summer Morning

BY MARILYN RUFF

It was one of those beautiful early mornings in Northern Michigan that one seems to be able to find only on a vacation. The small lake, encompassed by leaning verdure, was only a pinpoint on any map; only a dot labeled Clearwater about 50 miles north of Traverse City. But to the vacationing families, it was a luxurious little pinpoint, a small paradise for the lazy summer months. Many of these summer people owned their own cottages and some had taken the trouble to winterize them and now lived in Clearwater for the entire year, surviving the snow storms and enjoying the beauty of the lake during the winter too. The Andrews were such people, for they had lived here for sixteen years, ever since the children had grown up and left home and Mr. Andrews had retired. His wife stood on the porch of the house now, with her dressing robe drawn tightly around her ample figure, for it was cool and damp this early in the morning. She hardly ever got up so soon, for her husband slept late and she had no need to, but today she had been awakened by the sun streaming across her wrinkled eyes through the blind she had forgotten to draw the night before. And now she stood, shivering, on the shaded, screened-in porch and watched the small boats, occupied by hopeful fishermen, drift around the lake.

A little boy, with the sun shining brightly through his blond hair, attracted her attention by skipping along the dock which extended almost 100 feet out into the calm lake. His small feet, clad in dirty, torn, navy-blue sneakers, hit each board with a resounding thud, so that small sparkling ripples circled out from the supporting posts.

A smile crossed Mrs. Andrews' pale, round face when she noticed the boy cavorting along the pier which belonged to the house next door. He reminded her of her own son, Gordon, when he had been young. When she was reminiscing like this, an unguarded look

occupied her sometimes sarcastic eyes, and for a glimpse of it, any observer would generously have disregarded the small, rubber curlers into which her greyish-brown hair was twisted, the crumpled robe she wore, and the bland look of her moon-shaped face when her features weren't defined with cosmetics.

She watched with closer attention as the child's footsteps ceased and he stopped at the end of the dock. He raised his arm to shade his eyes and peered out over the lake at the boats. In a second, his arm came down and with both hands joined together, megaphone-style, he placed them to his mouth and yelled across the water, "Dad! Da-ad! DADDY!" The heads of most of the occupants of the boats turned toward him, but there was no answer. Mrs. Andrews grimaced to herself, thinking of her sleeping husband, but she laughed inwardly at the rage she imagined the fishers to have for this bellowing little boy who had shattered their calm and perhaps their luck. The boy was gesturing now and waving wildly. A small, limp, grey object was clutched in his hand. When he noticed an uncomfortable, feeble little motion in return from his father, he called again, but still no verbal answer. However, from the disapproving shakes of his father's head he could tell that he was supposed to be quiet. Slowly he turned around and with his head lowered, he started to return to the house, scuffing his toes across the boards, so that it was easy to see how his shoes came to be so torn and dirty. He was wearing a brightly clean tee shirt, however, its red and yellow stripes blazing across his narrow chest. And his pair of khaki pants, cut off at bermuda length, were clean and pressed in a sharp crease above skinny, well tanned calves. Even his short, blond crew-cut had just been brushed up in front, for tell-tale drops of water still remained glistening, on his forehead. It was obvious that he had dressed himself and left without the regular inspection by his mother. His shirt was untidily tucked in and the front of his shorts wasn't zipped clear up. Nevertheless, he did look quite presentable, considering the fact that his eight year old countenance was usually far from clean.

At this moment he halted his slow pace along the dock and scrutinized the greyish object he had so recently wanted to show his father. It was probably some type of small animal, Mrs. Andrews imagined, from her knowledge of the interests of small boys. He held it in one cupped hand and poked at it with the index finger of the other. The pout on his mouth necessarily passed when his freckled

nose wrinkled up and he dropped the object to the dock, wiping his hands distastefully on his shorts along either side of his snake thin hips. Curiosity prevailed and soon he squatted in that impossible child's position: head down between knees, shoulders hunched, and seat nearly touching the ground, probing the object gingerly with his forefinger.

At this point, Mrs. Andrews drew a deep breath of the rapidly warming morning air and turned to go inside the shady, cool house and begin the day with her usual cups of coffee. Before she had completely turned around, though, she felt a soft pressure against the backs of her legs. Startled, she turned to see Fritz looking up into her face with his tail anxiously wagging a signal to be let out. "Why, Fritz, good morning," she said pleasantly, almost as if she had been talking to a person. "Jimmy's beat you out this morning," she went on as she reached up and, unlocking the screen door, pushed it open an inch or so by leaning over the blackish-brown back of the big German Shepherd. The weight of the door was taken out of her hand as he forced it wide with his body and ran across the lawn, oblivious as a child to that inevitable slam which would result. She checked the slamming of the door with extended fingertips and again reached up and locked it mechanically, turning immediately now to the indescribable temptation of the coffee which beckoned her.

The dog, plowing through the deep grass, luxurious with dew, wagged his tail frantically and a soft whine, beginning in his throat, issued joyfully when he neared the dock on which the boy squatted. Soon, his nails clicked on the wooden boards and his heavy, but graceful body made the whole dock vibrate with each step. The little boy saw him coming out of the corner of his eye, but pretended still to be studiously intent upon his examination. The dog approached and unceremoniously stuck his inquisitive, wet nose over the boy's leg to study the creature on the dock too. This upset the delicate balance of the boy's position and he sprawled backwards on his seat, helpless against the dog's rough tongue which droolingly caressed his face. As the boy clambered to his feet, Fritz was pushed rudely away and sternly admonished by a whack on the back before he attained the child's good graces again. Then the boy took the dog's head between his hands, aimed his nose to within one inch of the grey object, and hissed the sharp command, "Sic 'em, Fritz!" Fritz obediently picked the object up in his mouth and the two walked off the dock, the boy's hand resting possessively on the dark,

almost bristly back of the dog.

With the official beginning of morning came the sound of a whirring boat engine and its preliminary put-put's as it took its first turn around the lake. From then on, activity flowed, warmed by the ever increasing power of the rising sun. The boy and the dog were behind the house, near a crude little unpainted building called a tool house, with their heads together in silence. Before them was a small mound marked by an amateurish cross. It was at this that the boy stared and the dog patiently gazed until a suitable period of time has elapsed. Then the boy rose, wiped his grimy hands on his quickly blackening shorts and responded to the wagging of the dog's tail by racing with him across the grass to the back door of the house.

The smells and noises from within announced that it was breakfast time. He knew his mother wouldn't want Fritz inside, so he gently told the dog to wait for him. With questioning eyes, the dog yielded to the rough treatment of having his stiff front legs pulled out from under him and his rear end pushed crudely down. He adjusted his reclining position as the boy ran inside. Here the day was completely changed and the child's expression changed too, to suit the cool, dark interior. His walk slowed as he heard his mother call to him from the kitchen, and as he approached, he replaced his eager look with one of wonderment to indicate that this was the first he had heard about the breakfast which was now drawing to a close without him. He clambered up onto his chair, but instead of being greeted by the expected reproofs for being late, he received merely a distracted nod from his mother. She was intent on his father's description of the morning's catch and was already planning to serve the fish to tonight's company.

Remembering the early morning brought a glow of delight to the boy's eyes. His father was finally in a position to have related to him those important things which he had unsuccessfully attempted to communicate from the dock. "Daddy, guess what I found this morning? A dead mouse floating in the water! And I could see his eyes, 'cause they were open, but he was so stiff I couldn't even bend his legs very well. Fritz and I buried him."

The entire family turned to the bright-eyed little boy with dismay in their own eyes. But the father was the first to speak, and in an annoyed tone he sharply said, "Just a minute, Jimmy, it's not polite to interrupt like that. Your mother and I are trying to figure

something out. Now, how many did you say will be coming, dear?" His parents went on with their discussion, but noting this remonstrance, his sister, who had writhed at the description of the dead mouse, giggled behind her hand and mockingly poked him under the table. He started in his chair and the convulsiveness of the movement sloshed milk over the side of the glass which slipped from his grasp and crashed to the floor. Sensing his danger, like a small animal, he leapt up from the family circle and dashed to the door, still clutching a piece of toast in his hand and chewing furiously on the Shredded Wheat in his mouth. Even after the door had slammed, he could hear his mother's furious lamenting about his clumsiness. He knew the utter defeat she felt, but didn't for a moment recognize the kinship in their feelings.

Again his pout returned and he scuffed along, this time in the grass, with Fritz morosely walking unrecognized at his side. The sun was even higher now and the day was warm enough already for him to shed his uncomfortable, milk-wet shirt. He left it lying in the grass to be bleached dry by the hot rays which seemed to warm his own irritability and encourage and nourish the wretchedness inside him, promising it an equal rising with the sun.

After he had fled from the kitchen, his mother cleaned up the pools of milk from the table, the chair and the floor, thinking, and accurately, to herself that this was going to be a hectic day. Already the humidity had distributed little drops of perspiration across her upper lip and forehead and out loud she said to no one in particular, "It's going to be a real scorcher." Her daughter, who was anxiously helping her, trying to recompense for her so-far unnoticed part in the accident, nodded agreement.

The rest of that morning, everyone went about their doings as unobtrusively as possible, for the sun, which had dawned so brightly, had waylaid any pleasant hopes and disclosed its disagreeable nature early, leaving the members of the family happy only as long as they were able to keep out of each other's way. The sultry heat continued to increase, for the day had not yet reached its height, and all understood the danger of breaking unexpectedly into another's unguarded solitude—all except the small boy.

In late morning, his mother sat on the porch reading yesterday's paper. Mrs. Andrews, who had come to chat a few minutes earlier, had understood the common feeling in that house this morning, and after a few remarks about the unquestionable beauty of the lake

under the torpid sun, she too lapsed into silence and into the rhythm of the knitting she was doing. A comment or two sufficed to keep the bond of understanding strong between the two women as they sat enduring the heat.

Now, nearly at noon, the dread promise of suffocation having almost been reached, the boy, who had forgotten his previous grudge against his mother, stole up behind her and ran his fingers along her shoulder and down her arm, making her start from her listless reverie. "What can I do, Ma?" he whined and his hand trailed maddeningly up and down her already hot and itchy arm. "There isn't anything to do here." With annoyance, she brushed away his complaining hand and told him to go out and play with Fritz. He lagged dejectedly into the house, his childish mind not comprehending that the heat which affected him also produced annoyance in his mother. Fritz plodded resignedly behind him, nails clicking on the linoleum floor. With disgust, his mother watched the huge animal follow him into the house, then amended her thoughts quickly when Mrs. Andrews mentioned wistfully the memories recalled to her by the sight of Jimmy and Fritz together.

The thought slipped over her, and without bothering to reflect upon all the implied sentiment of her neighbor's words, she let herself become enveloped by the fearful lethargy which had, before her son's interruption, surrounded her. A few minutes later, when she heard the door slam, she was aware only of the plaid blur of a bathing suit as Jimmy's slight form emerged from the house. She and Mrs. Andrews both vaguely noted with surprise the new enthusiasm apparent in him as he sped toward the lake, the faithful dog always following.

He really was more excited now, for even though there were none of the conventional, habitual things to do, he had recalled some clams which he had seen gleaming through the clear water on the bottom of the lake. They would make good decorations for the grave he had so carefully dug and in which he had seemed to bury his most pleasant dreams of the day ahead. When he reached the lake, after passing the screen of tall pine trees which partially hid it from the house, he stepped gingerly out onto the rocks that ran along the shore and then into the shockingly cold water. Wading around in ankle deep water, he urged Fritz who stood on the dock to come in. When the dog didn't respond, he became absorbed with the stones and small shells that glittered under the bright surface. He

walked further out into the lake, but always near the dock, keeping his eyes focused on the bottom. The dog followed his progress first with his eyes, then walked along the dock too, satisfying the boy's insinuations to come in by paying the minutest attention to his every motion. By now, though, the sun was at its fiercest height and caused the dog's tongue to hang out and his dark coat to be almost burning to the touch.

The boy advanced ever further into the shallow lake, beyond the end of the dock. When the dog had followed him to the extreme end, he stood and seemingly strained to watch him as he ducked under the water every now and then to retrieve a shiny shell. Fritz's ears were pricked forward and the hair on his back was standing on end as he tensely watched the boy abandon his shell search. In the water that by now came almost to his chin, he gave up his careful, methodical explorations. With childish impulsiveness he suddenly started diving and splashing around, waving his arms and laughing as the drops of water sprayed above his head and glimmered in the noonday sun, to which he was now impervious.

A low growl had started in the dog's throat as he stood on the blistering hot boards and an element of fear seemed to engulf him as he watched the boy flounder playfully. Soon it seemed he could either control himself no longer, or the sun had scorched the boards to such an extent that he could no longer endure their fire beneath his tender feet, for he flung himself into the water and began to swim desperately toward the splashing boy. His matted hair and dark body appeared suddenly, startlingly, to Jimmy through curtains of water. Then the pleased young voice victoriously shouted, "Fritzy!" But the hairy mass was now upon him and not playfully; it was blinding him, forcing him under the water. Above him, the bubbles appeared as clear, bright marbles floating along the surface, which one had to work tremendously hard to attain. When he finally did gain the surface, choking, he tried to free himself from the heavy animal, but felt a groping claw being dragged down his back with as much panic at he expressed with his own failing arms. The terror at this moment reached into his throat which loyalty and disbelief had until now kept closed and he opened his mouth and screamed and shouted in wild alarm.

To the women on the porch, in their mid-day torpor, the shouts seemed insignificant at first. But that faint uneasiness which had been rising all morning with the sun and had until now manifested

itself in trivial irritations, came to a head with the sense of this final misadventure of the morning. They were both on their feet now, and out and across the lawn. Now their feet trampled down the dock, shaking it violently and making a small, thunderous roar.

His mother was the first to reach the end where so recently the dog had been undecidedly perched. Fully dressed, but thinking only of Jimmy under the weight of the huge dog, she flung her arms forward spasmodically, half running, half swimming toward the struggling pair. With no more concern for the dog who had seemed so vicious, than a slight shove to get him out of the way, she leaned down in the water and picked up the limp body of her son. His hair was now too wet for the sun to shine through. Holding him high in her arms, she stumbled back to the dock where the elder woman was sobbing and wringing her hands. Oblivious to all else, his mother laid him gently down on a forgotten towel to protect his back from the sun's heat, hidden maliciously in the wooden planks. She leaned over him desolately and shivered in her wet clothes in spite of the heat. Her voice babbled continuously, frenziedly, and cold fear usurped the place of the previous hot anger.

But he did not answer her. He did not even open his eyes.