

johnny

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JOHNNY reached up with one grubby little fist to push away the sweat that was running down in his eyes. He brought his hook out of the water and looked at it again. The worm threaded on the end of it was a pale sick color, all washed out from having been trailed through the clear stream.

"Well, no wonder I haven't had a bite!" Johnny said aloud as he pulled at the wet worm. "I should have put a new one on a long time ago."

The dead worm didn't come off easily and he had to pinch the last piece between his fingernails to get it off. He reached up and brought a warm, moist ball of fresh worms out of his shirt pocket and held them in the palm of his hand where they came to life and began to squirm in a dozen different directions.

A great fat one disentangled itself first and began to push and pull its way out of the mass onto Johnny's flat palm. He pulled it out and guiltily stuffed the others back into his pocket as he remembered how his mother had bawled him out when he had put worms in his shirt pocket once before. Well, he thought a little angrily, he didn't have time to look for a tobacco can, if he was to get back in time for supper, did he?

He unsqueezed the hand holding the sticky worm and let it stretch out for a crawl so he could tell which end the head was on. If you put them on head first they pulled up and got all nice and fat. But if you got the other end they squirted mud and made themselves long and skinny and then it was hard to put them on.

He picked up the worm between his thumb and forefinger and stuck the point of the hook deftly through it. His fingers were too slippery

to push it on the rest of the way so he stooped over to wipe his hands in the dry dirt. He squeezed the rest of the worm on up the hook and examined it closely. Good. Not a bit of shiny metal showed. He guessed that was just about the best hook he'd ever baited. Boy those fish'd bite now.

Johnny tossed it back in the water and waited tensely, feeling the current pull the line gently downstream. He began to relax carefully as the expected tug on the line failed to come. If he was a fish, he thought idly, that worm was exactly what he'd want for an afternoon snack. And if he was a pretty big fish he'd push away the little ones and take it all for himself.

He stood there for about ten minutes staring into the water and trying to imagine the thoughts of the fish that must be down under there smelling around his hook. He wondered why they weren't hungry. He was plenty hungry and he hadn't been swimming around in a creek all day either.

He finally decided they must have all gone down to the big hole above the manure dam. Probably having a meeting of some kind there. It was a cinch they weren't any place else in the creek. He hated to walk so far; it was almost a quarter of a mile down to that hole but he knew they'd all be there for sure.

So he pulled his hook out and crossed over to follow down the fence line where he didn't have to duck so many branches. The hook dangling in front of him snagged on a bush and he pulled impatiently at it. His legs were tired and he was beginning to wonder if it was worth walking clear down there, when he heard the tiny noises.

He stopped for a minute to see where they were coming from and then ran over nearer the

creek. Seven furry brown balls were paddling along behind their mother. Baby wild ducks! He shoved his fishpole together and stuck the hook quickly into the cork handle. If he went around on the other side of the willow, he could sneak up and catch one of them.

He was glad his old tennis shoes didn't make any noise in the soft grass. Now if he could just slide out on that smooth log, they'd be sure to come right under and he could just reach over and pick one up easy as anything. And he could have, too, if his foot hadn't slipped on a piece of slick mold on the tree.

All the ducks scattered in different directions. One little fellow was so startled he climbed out through the mud and into the tall grass where Johnny easily caught him. He picked the frightened velvety ball up and held it gently in his hands, where he could feel it trembling too hard even to make more of the pathetic little squack noises.

Johnny felt huge and awkward and clumsy as he stroked the little duck with the back of his finger. Like a bully almost as he looked at the mother duck floundering in the grass near him, helplessly beating an injured wing on the ground.

"All right, Old Lady," Johnny said, wise for his nine years. "You can have your baby back if you want it." He stooped over and set the little duck on top of the glassy water and watched it paddle back under the willow.

The mother was still threshing about in the grass, trying to make Johnny follow her, but he knew better. Once, a long time ago, he had come upon a hurt duck and had tried to catch it but every time he'd get close to it, it'd manage to fly up a little bit and get farther from him. He followed it for about twenty minutes, he remembered, before it flew away, making him feel a little foolish for letting himself be duped so easily.

Johnny squinted at the sun trying to guess what time it was. He ought to be heading back pretty soon, he thought. He'd sure come a long way down in the field. But he plopped in the tall grass to rest for a bit before he picked up his pole and started off. It probably wasn't more than four o'clock.

The tall timothy standing up all around him gave him a tight secure feeling as he lay on his back staring up at the scattered white clouds splotted on the deep blue sky. He was chewing on a clover stem when he heard a faint rumbling noise. A train down at Halleck, he thought. On good days the sound carried easily over the twenty miles. He stood up to see if there was any smoke twisting up along the horizon.

AND as Johnny stood there vulnerable and weak, his khaki uniform outlined clearly against the grey Korean hills, the enemy shell got him. It slashed its way through his midsection and pushed him back into the foxhole. The stretcher bearers crouched over him there later.

"Hell, Joe," the older one said. "I don't know why he stood up. Maybe he was gonna be a hero. Maybe he just got scared. I don't know why he stood up. Wha'ja ask me for anyway?"



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