

A Short Story

IN TROUBLE AGAIN

AGE 7 TO 12



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"Hey Jody, check this out," cried Mike, as he tiptoed backwards around the edge of the goldfish pond. He was showing his best friend how clever he was by balancing on the narrow cement ledge. But Mike nearly slipped and fell into the water when he was startled by Mr. Griddley's cry.

"Get down at once!"

"Oh, go soak your head," Mike thought, and pretended not to hear. Goading the old man had become a new game recently.

"Uh oh," said Jody, as Mr. Griddley rushed out.

"You are not supposed to be on my property; go away and don't you hoodlums come back!"

"Jeez, what a grouch," muttered Mike as he and Jody ran off.

Minutes later they stood in the driveway and watched as Mike's big brother left to go fishing.

"Wish we could go fishing," said Jody.

"Yeah, me too, but Lee won't ever take us," Mike said with a wistful sigh.

"So why don't we go fishing ourselves?"

Behind the garden shed they found scrap wood. "With some sanding, we can use these as poles. And look, old bolts are just as good as lead sinkers."

In the house Mike found some string and safety pins packed away in a kitchen drawer.

"Now all we need is some fish to catch." The boys grinned at each other. And then they heard Mike's father calling them.

"Michael, Mr. Griddley told me you two were at his fish pond again. No don't - -"

"We didn't hurt his dumb fish, Dad. You never let me have any fun," interrupted Mike.

"Why do you kids pester that man?"

"We don't; besides, he's always yelling at us or something."

"Probably because you deserve it. Understand that your play can be very annoying. Baseballs off the house; soccer balls bouncing on the roof; junk floating in the goldfish pond; all of it bothers him."

"Old man Griddley is just an old jerk."

"Mike, this is it; do you hear me? I'm tired of it. From now on you boys stay off his property."

"I'll do what I want," Mike thought defiantly.

"Miii-Kaal!"

"Your mother's calling, but remember what I said. Now go!"

"Hi Mom."

"Hi Mrs. Brennan."

"Don't you two 'hi' me. What's the meaning of this?" she said pointing with a stiff arm and a hard stare to the sink full of water. There, slowly opening and closing its mouth, fanning water across pink gills, was a large fish. The round, unblinking eyes stared back at them.

"I don't know?" A chorus of two.

"Well just take it."

"But Mom, we didn't put the fish in there!"

"I said take that slimy fish right now, and put it back in Mr. Griddley's pond."

Mike and Jody, with the fish stuffed in a bucket of sloshing water, were still proclaiming innocence as they got pushed out the door.

"So now what? Mom says put the fish in the pond and Dad says stay away from the pond. Why does this always happen to me? No matter what I do, I get into trouble."

"It's because you're a middle child. My parents say the middle child always gets blamed. Boy, that's you, Mike."

"So why the big grin?"

"Because your dad won't punish me -- Ow!" A hard knuckle to the right bicep. A return jab. After a perilous scuffle, for the fish that is, the two finally headed for the pond.

"Since your mom sent us, we might as well have a good time."

Michael saw that special trouble look Jody sometimes got. A number of times before, that look had ended with things getting out-of-hand. And he was the one who usually was handed most of the blame and the worst of the punishment. Mike said nothing as he lead the way through the mass of azaleas that formed a hedge around Mr. Griddley's backyard. Carefully poking his head out, he immediately drew back, bumping into Jody. "He's there with some people," Mike whispered. From their hiding spot the boys watched Mr. Griddley and his visitors, a woman and a small child.

"Daddy, it's so good to be home again. I've missed this place and missed you most of all." The woman gave Mr. Griddley a hug.

Mike was amazed to see tears in the old man's eyes.

"Come on kiddo, let's get some cookies and lemonade," Mr. Griddley said as he tossed the little boy high into the air.

"I didn't know the old guy had family."

"Me either, Jody. I used to love Dad throwing me in the air like that. You know, I guess my father's right; we haven't been very nice to Mr. Griddley. Let's just dump this fish and go play somewhere else."

"OK. Here, let's have the pail."

"Hey, watch it."

"No don't. Lookout!"

"Oh man, we're soaked!"

"Quick, get the bucket, and let's get out of here."

As the boys came running around the shed, they almost knocked into Mike's father. There he was, looming large and dreadful, holding their two home-made poles. And there they were. Shoes squelching. Clothes soggy and sagging. Dripping guilt in little puddles. For a moment Mike stood as if frozen, too surprised to speak. Then the explanation came in double time, but it all tumbled out like double talk.

"So!" boomed his father's voice. A sound more frightening than the crack of the poles as they snapped on Mike's thighs. Even the sound stung. It hurt, but not just the hit and tears glistened in outraged eyes.

"I didn't do anything wrong!" Mike glared hard at his father, as anger flashed between them, "I - hate - you!"

"In the house. We're not finished with this."

"And it didn't hurt!" Mike shouted as the kitchen door slammed behind him.

"Jody, go home. I'm calling your parents right now."

"Mr. Brennan, you've made a mistake. You're always blaming Mike for everything, and it's not fair." Jody stomped away, missing Mr. Brennan's startled look.

Mike thought it weird that crying always made him so thirsty, and he headed for the kitchen, but stopped out in the hallway when he heard his brother's voice.

"MOM, I can't believe you did that."

"Did what?"

"Oh, hi Dad, I caught a real beauty, big enough for dinner, and Mom goes and ..."

"Lee, I thought Mike and Jody had fished it out of Mr. Griddley's pond.

"You mean there really was a fish in the sink? And you did tell Michael to put it in the pond?"

"In the pond? Say, we can still have a fish dinner. I'll go get my net." As Lee turned to open the door, outside, about to ring the bell, was Mr. Griddley.

"I came over to thank Michael," Mr. Griddley said. That big catfish is exactly what I needed. It's a bottom cleaner, you know; so now I won't have to drain the pond. It's very thoughtful of Michael. Do thank him. And he's welcome to visit, but no swimming. Scares the fish. Mr. Griddley continued to talk to himself all the way across the yard.

Into an astonished silence walked Mike, pretending he had heard nothing. "Just wanted a drink," he said turning towards the refrigerator.

"Michael, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"I can see there is. Please tell me why you've been crying."

"Ask him," he said, pointing to his father, who by then was flushed and looking embarrassed.

"I -- I should not be so hasty."

Silence.

"And I should believe you more."

Nothing.

"And I should not have hit you. I'm...I'm sorry."

"It did hurt."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't hate you."

"I know."

"And really Dad, we didn't do anything wrong. I tried to explain; I wanted to tell you that I won't bother Mr. Griddley anymore, that I understood, but the words wouldn't come out."

"Michael, I apologize. I'll also apologize to Jody. And while I'm at it, does anyone else here feel the need for an apology? Oh come on, get all those hands down; it was a joke. What do you say we go out for dinner?"

Mike felt his father's strong arm drop on his shoulders as they walked to the car. "Friends, right?"

"Right!"

"Mike, how about you and Jody going fishing tomorrow with me. Want to?"

"Lee, can we really?"

"Sure, that way I can keep an eye on you two, and I won't lose any more fish."

"Wouldn't bet on that. No I certainly wouldn't bet on that at all." Their father said with a laugh and a grin.

"You're right this time, Dad." But Mike said it in a whisper. Just in case, he thought, and grinned right back.