

Chapter Fifteen

“Hold still, why don’t ya ... I know it stings, but we gotta get it really well cleaned out. I don’t want this getting infected.” Frank was bathing Brian’s ear with an antiseptic. He rubbed it gently with a soft cloth while Brian squirmed.

“Ow ... okay, I’m trying, Owwww ... that hurts, you know.”

“I know, Boyo, I know ... I’m almost done for now.”

“For now? What did ya mean ... for now?”

“Well, I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is since it was a barbless hook it left a fairly clean wound. The bad news is we do have to keep it cleaned out. That hook had a lot of bacteria on it, what with it being in a fish’s mouth just before you, ahem, caught yourself.”

“I thought we agreed not to call it that.”

“You agreed not to call it that and you asked me not to, but I do like to use accurate language ... especially when it’s funny.”

“Yeah, right ... very funny. You’re hilarious.”

“It won’t be funny if it gets infected. Now, listen. I’ve been thinking that we ought to get started for Burns right away. I’ll get the boat and all the fishing gear packed up. I’d like you to clean up in here,” Frank waved his hand about the camper, “and get as much packed and ready as you can. Okay?”

“Sure Gramps, but didn’t you want to fish here at Chickahominy some more?”

“Oh, no matter now, the important thing is taking care of that ear. We’ll have plenty of time to fish in the Steens.”

“But I feel kind of bad, ruining your fishing and all.”

“Don’t worry about it for a second. Besides,” Frank added with a playful smile as he left the camper, “the story alone is better than any fishin’.”

Brian laughed, and then called out after his grandfather, “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

Brian started to pack up the first aid kit, the soap and towels. He found the books and magazines he’d read the night before and remembered his grandfather had taken them out of the cabinet above the table. When he opened the door to put them back he noticed a number of other books. His grandfather had a book on mushrooms and another on birds. There was a book on edible plants and paperbacks of *The Hobbit*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *Foundation*, *East of Eden* and *Man’s Search for Meaning*. When Brian placed the fly fishing book back on the shelf he noticed a leather-bound book lying on its side. It looked unusual and had a large, thick rubber band wrapped around it. The front cover was worn but the book gave the appearance of being well cared for. Brian didn’t want to be snoopy but felt compelled to open it just to see what it was. Opening it, he found the title in bold

black writing: MY BULLETIN BOARD. Brian thumbed through it quickly and noticed his grandfather had made notes on books he had read, movies he had seen and had collected a number of quotes that lay scattered throughout. In the back were folded pages that included newspaper and magazine articles as well as other writings. I've got to ask him about this, he thought, as he replaced the rubber band before returning the book to its resting place.

Soon, the camper was almost ready to go. Brian stepped outside to see if he could help his grandfather. The bright sunlight made him squint and he noticed how hot it had become. A dry wind from the west gusted just as he stepped down off the camper and blew dust past his feet. He wondered if it would get as windy today as it was yesterday when they pulled in. He wouldn't miss that.

"Hey Gramps, need a hand with anything?" he called over to Frank, who was busy with the boat.

"Yeah, great ... thanks, Boyo, come get this gear and put it on the table. We're just about ready to pack it all up and get on our way. This time, I'm going to hitch up the trailer and back it on down to get the boat. That way, I can leave some of the gear in the boat. It'll save some on trips and time."

Frank carried the rods and the cooler back up to the camper and soon had the camper packed and the trailer hitched to the truck. He carefully backed the trailer down the boat ramp until most of it was under water. He walked to the back of the truck and climbed onto the tongue of the trailer. Brian watched as Frank fiddled with the small hand-powered winch until the nylon rope, which sported a hook at the end, fed freely. He pulled out a good length of the rope and then turned to Brian. "Here, catch this and attach it to that bracket ... right there at the bow of the boat. Okay, Brian?"

"Yeah, sure, Gramps; no problem."

When that was done, Brian untied the ropes holding the boat to the pier allowing Frank to ratchet the boat up onto the trailer using the winch. When it was completely up and secured, Frank drove slowly up the boat ramp. The trailer and boat dripped water all the way to their campsite. After packing up the rest of the gear into the camper and into the boat, Frank, with Brian's help, placed the tarp once more over the boat and secured everything with some tie-downs and bungee cords. He looked over his handiwork and nodded, "Looks like we're just about to hit the road, Brian. Let's police the campsite and make sure we don't leave any trash lying around. Okay?"

They both walked about, picking up a bottle cap here and piece of plastic there, but their campsite was fairly clean. Frank looked at the campsite next to theirs, where the old man and his wife had been. "They must have pulled out while we were fishing," he said. There was a small collection of trash scattered about and Frank walked over to clean up this mess as well. He explained to Brian that he always liked to leave a place better than the way he found it. "Besides," he added, "I'd hate to have a nice family come into this campsite and find trash on the ground. It

only takes a minute, and if everyone felt the same way it would make for a better world, don't you think?"

"I guess, but they should have cleaned up their own mess."

"That may be, but since they didn't, I have a chance to be of service," Frank said with a nod of his head as he proceeded to clean up the area.

"Okay Boyo ... looks good. I guess we can get started. I'll drive on into Burns. Later, you can drive us to Frenchglen and I'll drive into the campground at Fish Lake. Oh! And ... we might as well have an early dinner in Burns. It'll save us some time." Frank climbed into the truck and smiled over at his grandson, "Well Brian, say goodbye to Chickahominy Reservoir, where you caught your first big trout."

"Yeah, and where I got a hook in my ear too."

The tires whined as the dry, windswept desert of Eastern Oregon sped by. Brian, slumped in the passenger seat, settled into an uneasy silence. Frank wondered what he was feeling and wanted to keep him amused until they got to town. He reached over to lower the volume on the music. "Brian, have I ever told you any of my nun stories?"

Brian glanced up puzzled, "Nun stories?"

"Well, yeah ... you know I went to Catholic school. And most of the teachers in my grammar school were nuns. Now, these women may have joined the order out of a sincere desire to serve, but I think something must have gone wrong with their perspective or attitude, 'cause some of those nuns were not nice people. I remember being taught about one of the Gospels where Jesus was quoted as saying "suffer the little children," which I interpret as meaning to be patient with them. Well, the nuns must have interpreted that differently because they seemed to have a wide variety of ways to make us suffer."

Frank spoke in a light, entertaining manner and the way he told this story led Brian to believe that it was one of his favorites. He also knew his grandfather well enough to realize that he was just warming up. The bright smile, the warm words spoken with just a touch of irony, and Frank's storytelling skills combined to kindle a clear sense of anticipation. Brian turned in his seat and smiled back at his grandfather.

Frank continued, "Suffer ... they could make school a living hell. Now Brian, you have to understand that times were different back then. Some of the stuff that was accepted then would not be tolerated nowadays. Heck, I remember my mother telling one of my teachers that if I misbehaved and she needed to let me have it ... then by all means, Sister, let him have it. She was giving this nun permission to hit me. Moreover, we were taught to just stand there and take it. Now, I was no angel and I knew I would get in trouble sooner or later and here I was standing next to my mother while she was giving this nun free rein. I remember thinking, oh no Mom, what are you saying? Some nuns didn't need any encouragement at all to hit us kids."

"I remember my first day of school ... my first day! My mother walks me to school and with all the kids lining up in front of the school ... she points over to the other kindergarten kids

and tells me, now Frankie, there are your friends. See, there's Kevin and Jimmy and Bobby, so you just go on over there and the nun will take care of you. But she didn't let me go right over. Oh, no ... she grabs me in her arms and starts giving me this hug. My baby, she says, you're getting so big, and today's your first day of school; then she starts crying. Okay, so now I'm wrapped up in my mother's arms while she's crying and all I want to do is go to school and besides, I didn't want the other kids to see my mother hugging me, but I couldn't move. I'm totally enveloped in this vice-like hug by a woman who's chosen this moment to have some sort of maternal meltdown. Finally, she lets me go and boy oh boy, did I go."

"Now here I am ... a kindergartener, what, six years old ... excited to be finally going to school but just a minute late getting into line. So, I went to the back of the line, not realizing that all the rest of kids were lined up in size order, with the smallest kids in front, to the biggest kids in back. I was a small kid, in fact, I was usually near the front of line throughout the rest of my years there; anyway, my friend Kevin O'Hara was the tallest kid in the class, so I just walked up to him and said 'Hi.' The school had a marching band, in fact, my aunts had been members. The band was playing something I didn't recognize, and the music, combined with my enthusiasm, soon had my feet moving ... it was like I couldn't stand still; I was that excited. Then, all of a sudden, I felt myself lifted off my feet by my ear! Some nun is slapping me and screaming at me how dare you dance during the 'Star Spangled Banner!' And why aren't you in your proper place in line? And the whole time she's yelling at me she's slapping me and yanking on my ear. So here I am crying and trying to stand as tall as I could 'cause she was really hurting my ear."

"But she doesn't stop. Instead, she drags me over to the principal and tells her, Sister, this young man, I was six for God's sake, this young man, was dancing during the 'Star Spangled Banner' and wasn't in his proper place in line! So the principal gives me a look that would have curdled milk and reaches out and grabs my hair right here," Frank held the top of his sideburn, "she yanked on it and slapped my face in time to her yells, you will not dance ... during the 'Star Spangled Banner' ... and you will find your proper place ... in line. When she finally let me go, the first nun, Sister Mary Rogers, whom we kids later called 'Jolly Roger' — you know, like the skull and crossbones, the pirate flag — she brings me back to the line and thrusts me toward another nun saying, I believe this one is yours sister; he was dancing during the 'Star Spangled Banner!' Now, by this time I imagined every nun in the place taking turns with me and I flinched as this new one reached toward me, but instead of more abuse, she brushed my hair with her hand and said to the other nun, thank you Sister, and to me she says, let's get you into line, at which the first nun says oh, and he wasn't in size order either, to which the new nun says again, but this time colder, thank you Sister. That second nun was Sister Priscilla, one of the nicest teachers I ever had—well I guess kindergarten teachers are supposed to be nice—but she sure was a good teacher and one of the nicest nuns I ever met."

Frank paused as much to laugh at his own story as to catch his breath. Brian sat doubled over in laughter. The story itself was terrible but Frank told it so well and with such humor Brian

couldn't help but laugh. "That's horrible, Gramps ... what a first day of school. I'll bet you behaved yourself after that, huh?"

"Well, I always lined up correctly after that and you better believe I stood still during the 'Star Spangled Banner,' but I wouldn't exactly say I behaved myself. I was always one of those kids, you know the type, that felt like all the rules didn't necessarily apply to them. Anyway, during my nine years at good old Saint Camillus I had my share of run-ins with the nuns. I swear, some of those nuns were real witches, or ahem, rhymes with witches." Then Frank smiled and added, "Of course, I did get even."

"You got even?"

"Yep. I got even. Do ya want to hear about it?"

"You bet."

"Okay. First, I have to explain about two of our teachers; Sister Frances Denise and Sister Mary Herbert. First, Sister Frances Denise, better known as Frannie or The Penguin."

"The Penguin?" Brian interrupted.

"Yeah, The Penguin. All the nuns looked more or less like penguins 'cause the habits, ah, uniforms were black robes with a white board over their chests and a white deal that covered their foreheads. See, black and white like a penguin. But Frannie ... she didn't just look like a penguin, she actually waddled like one too. She was our seventh-grade teacher. One day, for some reason, she was taking our class downstairs. The upstairs classrooms were reached by a long hallway that ran the length of the building with staircases at each end of the hall. The back staircase was rarely used. Well anyway, here we are lined up in size order, boys on one side of the hallway, girls on the other and she walks, or should I say waddles, to the head of the line and says, follow me class."

Frank looked over to Brian to see if his grandson was following along and continued when Brian nodded. "So she says, follow me class. So, off we go. She was leading us toward the front of the building. Anyway, we start following her down the hallway and without a word, one of the guys up near the front of the line starts to waddle just like Frannie; I mean just like her ... in perfect time ... in step, left-right-left-right. Before long, the entire line of boys was waddling in step, and in time, right behind The Penguin. When she moved left, we moved left; when she moved right, we moved right. We were all laughing silently and havin' a great time right up until the moment we heard the principal's voice yell out, Sister Frances Denise! Stop your class right now!"

"The principal had come up the little-used back stairway just in time to see the march of the penguins. Every boy knew we were in trouble. She walked up and whispered something into Frannie's ear and turned to the class. She looked up the line of boys; she looked down the line of boys. If any one of us would have smiled or laughed we would have all been dead and we knew it. There was not the slightest movement from any of us. Finally the principal said, all the boys in this class will report to me when school is over. I will be calling each of your parents to let them know why you will be late getting home today. That is all."

“Did you get in a lot of trouble, Gramps?”

“Not really; as I recall we had to clean up some junk in one of the old buildings on the school grounds. We even had fun doing it. And, as far as my parents were concerned, well, my old man thought it was funny and my mom tried to act shocked, but I think she thought it was funny too.”

“But you were saying you got even?”

“That’s right, where was I? Oh yeah, Frannie. She really wasn’t as bad as some of the others; if Frannie hit you it was generally for a good reason. Funny thing about her, I used to read other books during class, pretty much whatever I had at the time; mysteries, Sherlock Holmes, sports stories ... whatever, and during the day, if Frannie called on me and I was reading, she would make me bring her the book. Then I would go back to my desk and after a while start reading another book. She’d catch me again and make me turn it over as well. Sometimes she would end up with three or four of my books. She never gave me too hard a time over this and would give ’em all back at the end of the day. There were times when I was reading four or five books at the same time and other times when she would confiscate and return the same book day after day until I finished it. So, really, she wasn’t too bad, but one day I’m sitting at my desk, minding my own business, mind you, when she calls on me. Frank, says she, did you do your homework? To which I replied, yes Sister. And did you read the section in the catechism? Yes Sister. Now, this whole time I was racking my brain trying to remember what it was we had for homework and what in the catechism assignment might be important. So then, she says, why don’t you tell the class what Jesus said on the banks of the Jordan?”

“I didn’t know. What did Jesus say on the banks of the Jordan? I had no idea. So there I am trying to remember what Jesus said on the banks of the Jordan and for the life of me I couldn’t come up with an answer ... nothing ... not even a lame attempt at something. I paused and said, Sister, I don’t know. Now, there was something about my answer or the way I said it that really set her off, ’cause the next thing I know, she comes charging down the aisle, pulls me out of my seat and proceeds to really let me have it. I mean the whole works; hair-pulling, shaking, slapping.” Frank continued with a chuckle, “I think I was lucky she didn’t have a baseball bat handy.”

“Anyway, when she got tired of hitting me, she walked back up to the front of the class and called on someone else. But the question of whatever the hell Jesus said on the banks of the Jordan never did get answered. So I opened up the book and thumbed through to that section. I read it once. I read it again. I got mad. I became overwhelmed with righteous indignation. I became furious. My arm shot up like that of the little brownnose kid from the front of the class who knows the answer to something and can’t wait to show off, and it stayed up. Frannie glanced at me and looked away. The other kids near me whispered put your arm down, are you crazy? Put your arm down ... but my arm stayed up. Finally, she looks at me and says through clenched teeth, yes Frank, and I say, Sister I’d like to read something from the catechism ... she says, again,

through clenched teeth, go ahead Frank. So, this is what I read ... and Jesus stood on the banks of the Jordan and looked up to heaven as if to say—”

Frank looked over at Brian, who nodded, before continuing, “I repeated, as IF to say. Then I said, Sister, why don’t you tell the class what Jesus said on the banks of the Jordan?”

“Her answer came as quick as a bolt of lightning ... she charged down the aisle and let me have it again, but at least I had the satisfaction of being right. Well, I learned two valuable lessons that day,” Frank’s laughter spiced his words, “never give in to righteous indignation ... at least not on the spur of the moment and ... never show up another person, especially someone with power.”

“Okay, so what’s this about getting even?”

“I’m gettin’ there; be patient. Okay, so that’s Frannie, then there was Herbie, or should I say, Sister Mary Herbert. She was a witch. Herbie was our eighth-grade teacher and she really had it in for me. I suffered through a number of pretty good slappings throughout the year but a month or so before we were to graduate she really got me. At one point in what was already a good face-slapping she reached up and grabbed my ears and shook my head back and forth. Her fingernails were long and probably not all that clean; they cut me ... right here behind my ear.” Frank pointed to the back of his ear; he continued, “The blood ran down my neck and stained my collar ... I still have scars back there from it. Well, anyway, I get home and my mom sees the stains so I tell her what happened. She cleans it up and says Frankie, come with me. We’re going to the convent to see Sister Mary Herbert. The last thing I wanted to do was go see Sister Mary Herbert. I begged her not to ... I implored her not to ... to no avail, my mom had her mind made up, so off we go to the convent, which was next to the school. First, my mother speaks with the principal and a little while later Herbie comes to the door. My mom says to her, I saw what you did to my son’s ears and I want you to know that if you do anything else to him for the rest of this year, I will personally come down here and beat the shit out of you, lady. You got that? Mom didn’t call her Sister ... she said ‘lady.’ Later, on the way home, my mom told me to defend myself from Herbie if she tried that again.”

“Wow! So, how did you get even?”

“I’m gettin’ there. I’m gettin’ there. Well, I had no more problems with Herbie after that. I soon graduated and went on to high school. But, about three years later, I was driving along Rockaway Beach Boulevard after a heavy summer rainstorm when who do I see walking on the sidewalk two blocks away but Herbie, Frannie and some poor innocent bystander nun. The storm drains had filled and there was a big puddle next to them. Well, I hit that puddle doing about 40 miles an hour and I hit it fat. When I turned my head to see, I caught a glimpse of a wall of water hovering above the three nuns ... with them looking up at it. I drove four or five blocks and laughed so hard I had to pull over.”

“Did they know it was you?”

“Nope.”