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I was sitting in a big white rowboat. It was docked at the end of the pier that ran far out into the water of the lake. From where I sat in the stern, I could see the two brown tents where the rest of the Sugar Creek Gang were supposed to be taking a short afternoon nap.

That was one of the rules about camp life none of us liked very well but which was good for us because then we always had more pep for the rest of the day and didn't get too tired before night.

I'd already had my afternoon nap and had sneaked out of the tent and to the dock, where I was right that minute. I was just sitting there and imagining things such as whether there would be anything very exciting to see if some of the gang could explore that big tree-covered island about a mile away across the water.

Whew! It certainly was hot out there close to the water with the sunlight pouring itself on me from above and also shining up at me from below. The lake was like a big blue mirror that caught sunlight and reflected it right up under my straw hat, making my hot freckled face even hotter. Because it was the style for people to get tanned all over, I didn't mind the heat as much as I might have.

It seemed to be getting hotter every minute, though. It was the kind of day we sometimes had back home at Sugar Creek just before some big thunderheads came sneaking up and surprised us with a fierce storm.

It was also a perfect day for a sunbath. *What on earth made people want to get brown all over for anyway?* I thought. Then I looked down at my freckled brownish arm and was disgusted with myself. Instead of getting a nice tan like Circus, the acrobatic member of our gang, I always got sunburned and freckled, and my upper arm looked like a piece of raw steak instead of a nice piece of brown fried chicken. Thinking that reminded me that I was hungry, and I wished it was supper time.

It certainly was a quiet camp, I thought, as I looked at the two tents where the rest of the gang was supposed to be sleeping. I just couldn't imagine anybody sleeping that long—anyway, not any boy—unless he was at home and it was morning and time to get up and do the chores.

Just that second I heard the sound of footsteps from up the shore. Looking up, I saw a smallish boy with brown curly hair coming toward me along the path that runs all along the shoreline. I knew right away it was Little Jim, my almost best friend and the greatest little guy that ever lived. I knew it was Little Jim not only because he carried his ash stick with him—which was about as long as a man's cane—but because of the shuffling way he walked. I noticed he was stopping every now

and then to stoop over and look at some wildflower. Then he'd write something down in a book he was carrying, which I knew was a wildflower guidebook.

He certainly was an interesting little guy, I thought. I guess he hadn't seen me, because I could hear him talking to himself, which he had a habit of doing when he was alone. There was something kind of nice about it that made me like him even better than ever.

I think that little guy does more honest-to-goodness thinking than any of the rest of the gang—certainly more than Dragonfly, the pop-eyed member, who is spindle-legged and slim and whose nose turns south at the end; or Poetry, the barrel-shaped member, who reads all the books he can get his hands on and who knows 101 poems by heart and is always quoting one; and also even more than Big Jim, the leader of our gang, who is the oldest and who has maybe seventeen smallish strands of fuzz on his upper lip, which one day will be a mustache.

I ducked my head down below the dock so Little Jim couldn't see me and listened, still wondering, *What on earth!*

Little Jim stopped right beside the path that leads from the dock to the Indian kitchen, which was close by the two brown tents. He stooped down and said, "Hm! Wild strawberry." He leafed through the book he was carrying and wrote something down. Then he looked around him and, seeing a balm of Gilead tree

by the dock with some five-leaved ivy on it, went straight to the tree and with his magnifying glass began to study the ivy.

I didn't know that I was going to call out to him and interrupt his thoughts. That was something my mother had taught me not to do when a person is thinking hard, because nobody likes to have somebody interrupt his thoughts.

But I did. "Hi, Little Jim!" I said from the stern of the boat.

That little guy acted as cool as a cucumber. He just looked slowly around in different directions, including up and down. Then his blue eyes looked absentmindedly into mine, and for some reason I had the kindest, warmest feeling toward him.

His face wasn't tanned like the rest of the gang's. He was what people called "fair"; his small nose was straight, his little chin was pear-shaped, and his darkish eyebrows were straight across. His small ears were the way they sometimes were—lopped over a little because that was the way he nearly always wore his straw hat.

When he saw me sitting there in the boat, he grinned and said, "I'll bet I'll get an A in nature study in school next fall. I've found forty-one different kinds of wildflowers."

I wasn't interested in the study of plants at all right that minute. I was interested in having some kind of an adventure. I said to Little Jim, "I wonder if there are any different kinds of flowers over there on that island where Robinson Crusoe had his adventures."

Little Jim looked at me without seeing me, I thought. Then he grinned and said, “Robinson Crusoe never saw that island.”

“Oh yes, he did! He’s looking at it right this very minute and wishing he could explore it and find treasure or something,” I answered, wishing I were Robinson Crusoe myself.

Just that second another voice piped up from behind some sumac on the other side of the balm of Gilead tree. “You can’t be a Robinson Crusoe and land on a tropical island without having a shipwreck first, and who wants to have a wreck?”

I knew it was Poetry, even before he shuffled out from behind the sumac and I saw his round face and his heavy eyebrows that grew straight across the top of his nose, as if he had just one big long eyebrow instead of two like most people.

“You *are* a wreck,” I called to him, joking. We always liked to have word fights that we didn’t mean, after which we always liked each other even better.

“I’ll leave you guys to fight it out,” Little Jim said to us. “I’ve got to find me nine more kinds of wildflowers.” With that, that little chipmunk of a guy scuffed on up the shore, swinging his stick around and stooping over to study some new kind of flower he spied every now and then.

And that’s how Poetry and I got our heads together to plan a game of *Robinson Crusoe*, not knowing we were going to run into one of the strangest adventures we’d had in our whole lives.

“See here,” Poetry said, grunting and sliding down off the side of the dock and into the boat where I was, “if we play *Robinson Crusoe*, we’ll have to have one other person to go along with us.”

“But there were only *two* of them,” I said, “Robinson Crusoe himself and his man Friday, the boy who became his servant, and whom Crusoe saved from being eaten by the cannibals, and who, after he was saved, did nearly all Crusoe’s work for him.”

“All right,” Poetry said, “I’ll be Crusoe, and you be his man Friday.”

“I will *not*,” I said. “I’m already Crusoe. I thought of it first, and I’m already him.”

Poetry and I frowned at each other.

Then his round face brightened, and he said, “All right, you be Crusoe, and I’ll be one of the cannibals getting ready to eat your man Friday, and you come along and rescue him.”

“But if you’re going to be a cannibal, I’ll have to *shoot* you, and then you’ll be dead,” I said.

That spoiled that plan for a minute, until Poetry’s bright mind thought of something else, which was, “Didn’t Robinson Crusoe have a pet goat on the island with him?”

“Sure,” I said.

And Poetry said, “All right, after you shoot me, I’ll be the goat.”

Well, that settled that, but we couldn’t decide right that minute the problem of which one of the gang should be the boy Robinson

Crusoe saved on a Friday and whom he named his man Friday.

It was Poetry who thought of a way to help us decide which other one of the gang to take along with us. It happened like this.

“Big Jim is out,” I said, “because he’s too big and would want to be the leader himself, and Robinson Crusoe has to be that.”

“And Circus is out too,” Poetry said, “on account of he’s almost as big as Big Jim.”

“Then there’s only Little Jim, Dragonfly, and Little Tom Till left,” I said.

Then Poetry said, “Maybe not a one of them will be willing to be your man Friday.”

We didn’t have time to talk about it any further. Right then Dragonfly came moseying out toward us from his tent, his spindly legs swinging awkwardly and his crooked nose and dragonflylike eyes making him look just like a ridiculous Friday afternoon, I thought.

“He’s the man I want,” I said. “We three have had lots of exciting adventures together, and he’ll be perfect.”

“But he can’t keep quiet when there’s a mystery. He always sneezes just when we don’t want him to.”

Dragonfly reached the pier and let the bottoms of his bare feet go *ker-plop, ker-plop, ker-plop* on the smooth boards, getting closer with every *ker-plop*.

When he spied Poetry and me in the boat, he stopped as if he had been shot at. He looked

down at us and said in an accusing voice, "You guys going on a boat ride? I'm going along!"

I started to say, "Sure, we want you," thinking that, when we got over to the island, we could make a man Friday out of him as easy as pie.

But Poetry beat me to it by saying, "There's only one more of the gang going with us, and it might not be you."

Dragonfly plopped himself down on the edge of the dock, swung one foot out to the gunwale of the boat, caught it with his toes, and pulled it toward him. Then he slid himself in and sat down on the seat behind Poetry. "If anybody goes, I go, or I'll scream and tell the rest of the gang, and nobody'll get to go."

I looked at Poetry, and he looked at me, and our eyes said to each other, *Now what?*

"Are you willing to be eaten by a cannibal?" I asked, and he got a puzzled look in his eyes. "There're cannibals over there on that island—one, anyway—a great big barrel-shaped one that—"

Poetry's fist shot forward and socked me in my ribs, which didn't have any fat on them, and I grunted and stopped talking at the same time.

"We're going to play *Robinson Crusoe*," Poetry said, "and whoever goes will have to be willing to do everything I say—I mean everything *Bill* says."

"Please," Dragonfly said. "I'll do *anything*."

Well, that was a promise, but Poetry wasn't satisfied. He pretended he wanted Tom Till to

go along, because he liked Tom a lot and thought he'd make a better man Friday than Dragonfly.

"We'll try you out," Poetry said and caught hold of the dock and climbed out of the boat.

The other two of us followed him.

"We'll have to initiate you," Poetry explained, as we all walked along together. "We can't take anybody on a treasure hunt who can't keep quiet when he's told to and who can't take orders without saying, 'Why?'"

"Why?" Dragonfly wanted to know.

But Poetry said with a very serious face, "It isn't funny," and we went on.

"What're you going to do?" Dragonfly asked, as we marched him along with us up the shoreline to the place where we were going to initiate him.

I didn't know myself where we were going to do it. But Poetry seemed to know exactly what to do and where to go and why, so I acted as though I knew too.

Poetry made me stop to pick up a big empty gallon can that had had prunes in it—the gang ate prunes for breakfast nearly every morning on our camping trip.

"What's that for?" Dragonfly asked.

And Poetry said, "That's to cook our dinner in."

"You mean—you mean—me?"

"You," Poetry said. "Or you can't be Bill's man Friday."

"But I get saved, don't I?" Dragonfly said with a worried voice.

“Sure, just as soon as I get shot,” Poetry explained.

“And then you turn into a goat,” I said, as he panted along beside us, “and right away you eat the prune can.”

With that, Poetry smacked his lips as though he had just finished eating a delicious tin can. Then he leaned over and groaned as if it had given him a stomachache.

Right that second, I decided to test Dragonfly’s obedience, so I said, “All right, Friday, take the can you’re going to be cooked in and fill it half full of lake water!”

There was a quick scowl on Dragonfly’s face, which said, *I don’t want to do it*. He shrugged his scrawny shoulders, lifted his eyebrows and the palms of his hands at the same time and said, “I’m a poor heathen. I can’t understand English. I don’t want to fill any old prune can with water.”

With that, *I* scowled and said to Poetry in a fierce voice, “That settles that! He can’t take orders. Let’s send him home!”

Boy, did Dragonfly ever come to life in a hurry! “All right, all right,” he whined, “give me the can.” He grabbed it out of my hand, made a dive toward the lake, dipped the can in, and came back with it filled clear to the top with nice clean water.

“Here, Crusoe,” he puffed. “Your man Friday is your humble slave.” He extended the can toward me.

“Carry it yourself!” I said.

And then, all of a sudden, Dragonfly set it down on the ground where some of it splashed over the top onto Poetry's shoes. Dragonfly got a stubborn look on his face and said, "I think the cannibal ought to carry it. I'm not even Friday yet—not till the cannibal gets killed."

Well, he was right, so Poetry looked at me and I at him, and he picked up the can, and we went on till we came in sight of the boathouse, which, if you've read *Screams in the Night*, you will already know about.

It was going to be fun initiating Dragonfly—just how much fun I didn't know. And I certainly didn't know what a mystery we were going to run into in less than fifteen minutes.

In only a little while we came to Santa's boathouse. Santa, as you know, was the owner of the property where we had pitched our tents. He also owned a lot of other lakeshore property up there in that part of the Paul Bunyan country. Everybody called him Santa because he was round like all the different Santa Clauses we'd seen, and he was always laughing.

Santa himself called to us with his big laughing voice when he saw us coming. "Well, well, if it isn't Bill Collins, Dragonfly, and Poetry." Santa, being a smart man, knew that if there's anything a boy likes to hear better than anything else it's somebody calling him by his name.

"Hi," we all answered him.

Poetry set down the prune can of water with a savage sigh as if it was too heavy for him to stand and hold.

Santa was standing beside his boathouse door, holding a hammer in one hand and a handsaw in the other.

“Where to with that can of water?” he asked us.

And Dragonfly said, “We’re going to pour the water in a big hole up there on the hill and make a new lake.”

Santa grinned at all of us with a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes, knowing Dragonfly hadn’t told any lie but was only doing what most boys do most all the time anyway—playing make-believe.

“May we look inside your boathouse for a minute?” Poetry asked.

And Santa said, “Certainly. Go right in.”
We did and looked around a little.

Poetry acted very mysterious, as though he was thinking about something important. He frowned with his wide forehead and looked at different things such as the cot in the far end, the shavings and sawdust on the floor, and the carpenter’s tools above the workbench—which were chisels, screwdrivers, saws, planes, and hammers and nails. Also, Poetry examined the different kinds of boards made out of beautifully stained wood.

“You boys like to hold this saw and hammer a minute?” Santa asked us. He handed a hammer to me and a saw handle to Dragonfly, which we took, not knowing why.

“That’s the hammer and that’s the saw the kidnapper used the night he was building the

grave house in the Indian cemetery,” Santa said.

I felt and must have looked puzzled till he explained, saying, “The police found them the night you boys caught him.”

“But—but how did they get *here*?” I asked.

Poetry answered me by saying, “Don’t you remember, Bill Collins, that we found this boat-house door wide open that night—with the latch hanging? The kidnapper stole ’em.”

I looked at the hammer in my hand and remembered. I tried to realize that the hammer I had in my hand right that minute was the same one that, one night last week, had been in the wicked hand of a very fierce man who had used it in an Indian cemetery to help him build a grave house. Also, the saw in Poetry’s hand was the one the man had used to saw pieces of lumber into the right lengths.

“And *here*,” Santa said, lifting a piece of canvas from something in the corner, “is the little nearly finished grave house. The lumber was stolen from here also. The police brought it out this morning. They’ve taken fingerprints from the saw and hammer.”

“Why on earth did he want to build an Indian grave house?” I asked, looking at the pretty little house. It looked like the chicken coop we had at home at Sugar Creek, only almost twice as long.

Dragonfly spoke up then and said, “He maybe was going to bury the little Ostberg girl there.”

But Poetry shook his head. “I think he was going to bury the ransom money there, where nobody in the world would guess to look.”

Well, we had to get going with our game of *Robinson Crusoe*, which we did, all of us feeling fine to think that last week we had had a chance to catch a kidnapper, even though the ransom money was still missing.

2

I had a weird feeling as we left the boathouse and went up the narrow, hardly-ever-used road to the top of the hill. Then we followed that road through a forest of jack pine and along the edge of a little clearing. I was remembering what exciting things had happened here the very first night we'd come up North on our camping trip.

I think Poetry was remembering too, because he said in a ghostlike voice to make the atmosphere of Dragonfly's initiation seem even more mysterious to him, "Right here at this sandy place in the road is where the car was stuck in the sand. And right over there behind those bushes is where Bill and I were crouching half scared to death, watching him."

"Yeah," I said, "and he had the little Ostberg girl he'd kidnapped right in the backseat of the car all the time, and we didn't know it."

"How'd he get his car *unstuck*?" Dragonfly wanted to know, even though the whole Sugar Creek Gang had probably been told a dozen times by Poetry and me.

So I said, "Well, his wheels were spinning and spinning in the sand, and he couldn't make his car go forward. But it would rock forth and back, so he got out and let air out of

his back tires till they were almost half flat. That made them wider and increased traction. And then, when he climbed back into his car and stepped on the gas, why he pulled out of the sand and went *lickety-sizzle* right on up this road.”

“You going to initiate me *here*?” Dragonfly asked.

I started to say, “Yes,” but Poetry said, “No, a little farther up, where we found the little girl herself.”

We walked along in the terribly sultry afternoon weather. Pretty soon we turned off the road and came into a little clearing that was surrounded by tall pine trees. I was remembering how right here Poetry and I had heard the little girl gasping out half-smothered cries. And with our flashlights shining right on her, we’d found her lying wrapped up in an Indian blanket.

“She was lying right here,” Poetry said, “right here where we’re going to initiate you.” Poetry’s ordinarily ducklike voice changed to a growling bear’s voice. He sounded very fierce.

There really wasn’t anything to worry about out here, though. We knew the police had caught the kidnapper, and he was in jail somewhere, and the pretty little golden-haired Ostberg girl was safe and sound with her parents again back in St. Paul.

“But they never did find the ransom money,” Poetry said, which was the truth. “And nobody knows where it is. But whoever finds it gets a

thousand dollar reward—a whole thousand dollars!”

“You think maybe it’s buried somewhere?” Dragonfly asked with a serious face.

“Sure,” Poetry said. “We’re going to play *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island* both at once. First we save our man Friday from the cannibals, and then we quit playing *Robinson Crusoe* and change to *Treasure Island*.”

Well, it was good imagination and lots of fun, and I was already imagining myself to be Robinson Crusoe living all by myself on an island. In fact, I sometimes have more fun when I imagine myself to be somebody else than when I am just plain red-haired, fiery-tempered, freckled-faced Bill Collins.

It was fun the way Poetry and I initiated Dragonfly into our secret game—anyway, fun for Poetry and me. This is the way we did it.

I hid myself out of sight behind some low fir trees with a stick in my hand for a gun. Poetry stood Dragonfly up against a tree and tied him with a piece of string he carried in his pocket.

“Now, don’t you dare break that string!” Poetry told him. “You’re going to be cooked and eaten in a few minutes! You can pretend to try to get loose, but don’t you dare do it!”

I stood there hiding behind my fir trees, getting ready to shoot with my imaginary gun just in time to save Dragonfly from being cooked.

Dragonfly did look funny standing there tied to the tree and with a grin on his face, watching Poetry stack up a little pile of sticks

for our imaginary fire. We wouldn't start a real fire. Nobody with any sense starts a fire in a forest, because then there might be a terrible forest fire. Thousands of beautiful trees could be burned, and lots of wild animals, and maybe homes and cottages, and even people themselves.

When the stack of sticks was ready, Poetry set the big prune can on top. Then he turned to Dragonfly and started to untie him.

"Groan!" Poetry said to him. "Act like you're scared to death! Yell! *Do something!*"

Dragonfly didn't make a very scared native boy. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said.

And there wasn't, I thought.

But all of a sudden there was. As soon as Poetry had Dragonfly cut loose, he dragged him toward the imaginary fire. Dragonfly was making it hard for him by struggling and hanging back and making his body limp so that Poetry had to almost carry him. And just as I peered through the branches of my hideout and pointed my stick at Poetry and was getting ready to yell, "*Bang! Bang!*" before rushing in to rescue Dragonfly, there was a crashing noise in the underbrush behind me.

I heard footsteps running and then a loud explosion that sounded like a gun going off, which almost scared the living daylight out of me—and also out of the poor boy and the cannibal that was getting ready to eat him.

When I heard that shot behind me, I jumped almost out of my skin, I was so startled

and frightened. Poetry and poor little pop-eyed Dragonfly acted as if they were scared even worse than I was.

When you're all of a sudden scared like that, you don't know what to say or think. Things sort of swim in your head, and your heart beats fiercely. Maybe we wouldn't have been quite so frightened if we hadn't had so many important things happen to us already on this camping trip, such as finding the little kidnapped girl in this very spot the very first night we'd been up here—and then the next night catching the kidnapper himself in a spooky Indian cemetery.

I was prepared to expect almost anything when I heard that explosion and the crashing in the underbrush. And then I could hardly believe my astonished eyes when I saw right beside Dragonfly and Poetry a little puff of bluish-gray smoke, and I knew that somebody had thrown a firecracker right in the middle of our excitement.

“It's a firecracker!” Dragonfly yelled.

And then I had an entirely new kind of scare. I saw a little yellow flame where the explosion had been. And then I saw some of the dry pine needles leap into flames, and the flames start to spread fast.

I knew it must have been one of the gang who'd maybe had some firecrackers left over from the Fourth of July at Sugar Creek.

Quicker than I can write it for you, I dashed into the center of things, grabbed up our

prune can full of water, and in seconds had the fire out.

Then, seconds later, I heard a scuffling behind me and a grunting and puffing. Looking around quick—the empty prune can was still in my hands—I was just in time to see Circus scramble out of Poetry’s pudgy hands and go shinnying up a tree, where he perched himself on a limb and looked down at us, grinning like a monkey.

I was mad at him for breaking up our game of make-believe and for shooting off a firecracker in the forest, where it might start a terrible fire. So I yelled up at him and said, “You crazy goof! Don’t you know it’s terribly dry around here and you might burn up the whole Chippewa Forest?”

“I was trying to help you kill a cannibal,” Circus said. But he had a hurt expression in his voice and on his face as he added, “Please don’t tell Barry I was such a dumbbell.” Barry was our camp director.

I forgave Circus right away when I saw he was really trying to join in our fun and just hadn’t used his head, not thinking of the danger of forest fires at all.

“You shouldn’t even be carrying matches to light a firecracker with,” Poetry said up at him.

“Every camper ought to have a waterproof matchbook with matches in it,” Circus said. “I read it in a book that told what to take along on a camping trip. Besides,” he said down to us, “we can’t play *Robinson Crusoe* without having to

eat, and how are we going to eat without a fire?"

I knew then that he'd guessed what game we were playing and had decided to go along.

"We don't need you," I said. "We need only my man Friday and a cannibal that gets killed—"

"And turns into a goat," Poetry cut in to say.

"Only *one* goat would be terribly lonesome," Circus said. "I think I ought to go along. I'd be willing to be another goat."

Well, we had to get Dragonfly's initiation finished, so I took charge of things and said, "All right, Poetry, you're dead! Lie down over there by that tree. And you, Dragonfly, get down on your knees in front of me and put your head clear down to the ground."

"Why?" Dragonfly asked.

And I said, "Keep still. My man Friday doesn't ask, 'Why?'"

Dragonfly looked a little worried. But he did as I said and bowed his head low in front of me with his face almost touching the ground.

"Now," I said, "take hold of my right foot and set it on the top of your neck—*no!*" I yelled down at him. "Don't ask, 'Why?' Just do it!"

Dragonfly did.

"And now, my left foot," I ordered.

"That's what the boy did in *Robinson Crusoe*, so Crusoe would know he thanked him for saving his life from the terrible cannibals and that he would be his slave forever," I said to Dragonfly. "Do you solemnly promise to do everything I say from now on and forevermore?"

Dragonfly started to say, "I do," but got only as far as "I—" when he started to make a funny little sniffing noise. His right hand let loose of my foot, and he grabbed his nose and went into a tailspin kind of sneeze. He ducked his neck out of the way of my foot and rolled over and said, "I'm allergic to your foot."

The dead cannibal on the ground thought that was funny, and he snickered, but I saw a little blue flower down there with pretty yellowish stamens in its center, and I knew why Dragonfly had sneezed.

My man Friday, rolling over, tumbled *ker-smack* into the cannibal. The two of them forgot they were in a game and started a friendly scuffle, just as Circus slid down the tree and joined in with them. All of a sudden Dragonfly's initiation was over.

He was my man Friday, and from now on he had to do everything I said.

Up to now it was only a game we'd been playing. But a minute later Circus rolled over and over, clear out of reach of the rest of us, and scrambled up into a sitting position. He said to us excitedly, "Hey, gang, look! I've found something—here at the foot of the tree. *It's a letter of some kind!*"

I stared at the old envelope in Circus's hands, remembering that right here was exactly where we'd found the kidnapped girl. I remembered that the police hadn't been able to find the ransom money and that the captured kidnapper hadn't told them where it was.

In fact, he had absolutely refused to tell them. We'd read that in the newspapers.

Boy oh boy, when I saw that envelope in Circus's hands, I imagined all kinds of things, such as its being a ransom note, or maybe it had a map in it that would tell us where we could find the money and everything! Boy oh boy oh boy oh boy!