

Snips and Snails and Frog Tales

“Froglegs? You can’t eat *frogs*.”

“Uh-huh. My Gramma made ‘em for me,” Billy responded.

He tried to picture the long, fried legs in his head, and though he couldn’t see them, his mouth still watered. He didn’t like having to go to his Gramma’s on the weekend, but if he got outta being around when his mom’s boyfriend stayed over, then Gramma’s cooking plus that almost made it ok. Her froglegs were so good, he couldn’t imagine why his friend Tommy didn’t believe you could eat froglegs.

Billy spent as much time as he could exploring out in the woods behind his house even when his friend couldn’t. Tommy always had to go home as soon as his mom called, but Billy’s babysitter said he could do whatever he wanted, just as long as he stayed out of her hair. There was only one rule, she told him in her scary voice, “Get your butt home before your mom does – or else.” So he played with his friend until Tommy had to go home, and then played on his own until he was too hungry to stay out anymore.

He didn’t mind spending time in the woods alone. His favorite place to play around was by a small dirt bed that filled up with water when it rained. Billy could splash rocks or throw them at skimmer bugs and other things swimming in the water. He could also always count on there being frogs around making lots of noise even when he couldn’t see them. Today, they were frog hunting because Billy decided he wanted froglegs for dinner. He figured he’d catch a big one and if his mom came home before he fell asleep, then maybe she could fry it up like Gramma does. He squatted down on the muddy bank of the pond and searched around where he thought he heard something. He finally spotted one by the water’s edge under some floating leaves. He

slowly moved his hand toward the surface, waited there for a second, then grabbed into the water as fast as he could. When he pulled his hand out, it was filled with a dripping mix of mud and water and one squirming frog. It barely filled his hand but one of its kicking legs stuck out between his fingers.

With a grin on his face, he held the frog out to his friend as proof positive of his Gramma's cooking.

"See!" Billy said triumphantly.

"You didn't eat one of those?" his friend replied doubtfully.

Billy saw that the frog was much too small to be the same thing Gramma had cooked. Looking at it closely, he also wondered why the froglegs his Gramma cooked didn't have webbed feet either. She told him you couldn't eat that part 'cause it tasted bad, but he still wondered what happened to those webbed feet. Where did she put them all? For some reason he thought of his lucky rabbit's foot with green fur and a key chain, but he knew there was no such thing as a green rabbit. Things aren't always what they seem.

"Well, this one's legs are too small," he said after considering it a little longer. He looked around then pointed at a stick floating in the water. "The one's I ate were bigger'n that stick."

"Really! Nuh-unh. That's too big." The floating stick was longer than his foot and thicker than his bicycle's handlebars.

Tommy didn't usually disagree with him unless Billy seemed unsure. Billy wasn't ready to give up though. He had to prove that he'd eaten honest-to-goodness froglegs, but somehow things didn't seem to add up in his head. Maybe froglegs were just a funny name Gramma told him, like those weird shaped gizzards that she always fixed for him. He liked the foods with animal names and body parts, probably because his mom never made neat stuff for dinner. Except sometimes on Sundays she made hot Buffalo wings. He had to eat them in the TV room

with his mom's boyfriend, Steve, who always made him fetch beers. Sundays were no fun, except for the food. Steve always cursed and shook his fist at the football players on TV, but when Billy mimicked him trying to support the team too, Steve would smack him on the side of the head. It didn't hurt too much because Billy always knew it was coming. Steve would warn him - "Watch your mouth, boy!" then *whack*. He liked it better when no one was there to tell him what to do.

Billy looked at the frog still squirming in his hand again. Disappointed with it, he winged it back into water. It landed with a good splash and didn't seem to move after that. It lay sprawled out pale-side up looking a lot like the frogs he would catch and put in his pickle jar on the back patio. Sometimes the jars would get too hot to touch and the frog would be floating on its back when he checked it later in the day. He always let them go after that.

Tommy waited for the frog in the pond to move. When it didn't, he seemed concerned.

"Why's it just laying there?"

"Dunno," Billy shrugged. "What's the biggest frog you ever seen?"

"That one is big. But I saw one biggern' a baseball once."

"Hmm. Is that as big as a pipe? A boy in school says he has one that lives in the pipe under his house. It's so big that it's stuck there and it can't get out."

"Have you seen it?"

"No. But we can go over there and see if we can get it. I bet he's not even home right now."

"Well, I'm not sure. I have to ask first."

While Tommy was gone Billy pulled his Big Wheel out of the garage and waited in front of his house by the mailbox. Tommy showed up on his bike after what seemed like a really long time. He told Billy he could come if he rode on the sidewalk and stayed within shouting distance of home. Those were always the rules Tommy's mom had, but they had not yet found a

place that his mother's voice couldn't reach. Billy rode out in front to the other boy's house, which was only two blocks over. He had to ride slow because Tommy couldn't keep up very well since he had just learned to ride without training wheels. Billy was the only five year old in his school who couldn't ride a bike yet. His mother promised she'd teach him when she had time, but she never did. Tommy yelled to him to wait up again, so Billy slowed down. It was a good thing too or he might never have noticed the huge beetle in the middle of the sidewalk. His friend pulled up beside him to see why he'd stopped then looked down to where Billy was gazing. The beetle had a giant claw for a mouth and looked like it was straight from a monster movie. They watched it for a little bit, but it wasn't moving much. A few red ants curled up in balls were lying near the beetle. Tommy looked at Billy wide-eyed and when Billy got off his Big Wheel to get a closer look, Tommy followed. On their knees like cats watching a mouse, they could see everything. A red ant was holding the leg of the big beetle trying to drag it backwards. Behind it a path of red ants led back to the edge of the cement where a small dirt hill bulged out between the boundary of grass and sidewalk. More ants were coming out of the anthill to join the battle. The black beetle woke up a little and kicked its legs quickly trying to run, not getting very far. It looked almost beaten, but not completely. If it could break free from just one last ant still latched onto it, it might be able to get away. Billy reached over and flicked the beetle a few inches back in the direction of the anthill.

"Don't," Tommy scolded in a hushed voice.

"Why?" Billy asked, as usual not understanding why his friend often didn't want to do the things he wanted to do.

"Just 'cause."

They waited and watched as ants surrounded and engulfed the beetle. It seemed to carry the entire pile of ants a few steps towards freedom, but no further. Its claw-mouth opened wide but

never closed again and after that it quit moving completely. Only the swarming ants were left.

Tommy looked a little disappointed, but Billy couldn't conceal his satisfaction.

They didn't linger long, since Billy was anxious to find that giant frog. Back on his ride, he pedaled off to their schoolmate's house with Tommy lagging behind. As he arrived he could tell no one was home right away, so he got off his Big Wheel and headed towards the house to begin the hunt. Once Tommy got there he carefully put his kickstand down, parked his bike, then spotted Billy already in the backyard, who waved him on to hurry up. Tommy followed tentatively.

Billy searched around the foundation of the house looking for the frog's hiding place. He remembered his classmate said something about a pipe along the bottom of the house. It had something to do with rain or drains, but he couldn't recall the particulars. They searched for a while but couldn't find it. Tommy asked if it was the right house or if maybe his schoolmate had made the whole thing up. Either way Tommy said they probably shouldn't be hanging around at someone's house when he wasn't even home.

Billy noticed an uneasy look on his friend's face; a look that made him think Tommy just remembered he was late for dinner. Billy was pretty sure that dinner time wasn't for a while. He stared at Tommy trying to figure out the other boy's expression, his face nervous and his eyes darting around. Billy followed his friend's gaze, which kept looking down near Billy's feet. There he noticed a path of dirt and pebbles. The grassless swath led back towards him until it disappeared a few feet in front of him. Billy realized it led right to the mouth of the pipe, and he was practically standing on top of it. He wondered why he hadn't noticed it before.

Billy stepped around to get a look at the opening. His eyes widened when he saw how big it was. It was big enough to fit one of those gigantic baseballs Steve had in his mitt laying in the back of his pick-up truck. If there were a frog stuck in there, then it would be big enough to make

Gramma's froglegs. He tried to remember why he ever thought that froglegs weren't actually frog's legs. He looked back at his friend with a wide-eye grin, and then got down on his knees to look inside the tube. He placed his hand on top of the pipe then kneeled down to peer into the dark opening.

"I don't see anything."

"Maybe it's too dark," Tommy offered.

Billy looked up checking to see that there was in fact light outside. He looked at his friend thinking he must be blind - it was bright and sunny out. He placed his face back near the opening, leaving his hand on the ground rather than blocking the outside light. Immediately, he noticed a glint way far back in the pipe, but he blinked and it was gone. The further into the pipe he looked the more the walls of the pipe faded into shadow, but as his eyes slowly got better at seeing in the dark, he began to think maybe they were playing tricks on him. Far back in the pipe, he imagined he could see a glowing eye. Then the faint glimmer seemed to disappear only to be followed by a glowing eye a few inches away. As he watched he became more and more certain there was, in fact, something peering back at him. Sometimes both eyes seemed to swing back and forth, left to right, in slow motion, as if saying '*Nooooo*.' "No, what?" Billy thought, but he was undeterred. It occurred to him that if it was moving around so much, then it must not be stuck, which also meant that it must not be as big as he thought. For a moment he felt a little disappointed, but it didn't matter, as he told Tommy there was a pretty big frog in there all right.

He lay down then turned his head away from the opening to reach in. As he thrust his arm deep into the pipe he saw the funny nervous look on his friend's face again. He should just go if he had to go, Billy thought. He wants this frog for himself. Billy's arm fit inside with plenty of clearance, but still he brushed the cool walls as it slid inside. He pushed his arm in until it couldn't go in any further. His fingers stretched and his armpit pressed painfully against the edge

of the pipe's opening, but still he couldn't feel anything at the end of his reach. Eyes clenched shut, he searched with his fingers and pictured the giant frog in his head. His mind drifted as he daydreamed about the catch he was about to make. He wondered if the frog would fit in his biggest jar, but then he hoped not. He hoped it was bigger. He reached harder, but still felt nothing. Impatient he wished the frog would just hop into his hand. Feeling frustrated, he pulled his hand out, got up, and started searching around for something that may help him get it. If he could find a stick, maybe he could poke it hard enough that it would want to come out.

After a hurried search around the yard, Billy saw a low hanging branch, snapped it off the tree, and stripped the leaves as he walked back to the drain pipe. Tommy sat on the ground just over the pipe opening, watching warily as the process unfolded. Billy squatted down and shoved the stick deep into the hole. He was careful not to thrust too fast, fearful of making the frog more stuck. When it reached a stopping point, he pulled it back a little and slowly thrust it in again. He felt the stick wiggle a little, then shake violently. He drew his hand back reflexively but the stick was practically pulled out of his grip. He fell back, right as something emerged from the pipe. A snake-like head peered out with tongue darting in and out, hissing with wide open mouth. As it emerged completely from the pipe, Billy could see that it wasn't a snake, but rather a giant lizard with a body as long as his arm and orange and black bands running across its tail. This lizard would definitely not fit in his pickle jar. He wondered for just an instant where the frog was, but then realized this was an even better prize.

The monstrous lizard stuck its tongue out a couple more times as it seemed to stare Billy down. Billy wasn't sure why he hadn't pounced on it yet, or for that matter, why Tommy hadn't just reached out and grabbed it by the tail while it wasn't looking. But Billy then remembered what his friend probably already knew - you can't catch a lizard by its tail. Whenever Billy had

tried in the past he was always left staring at a tail wiggling between his fingers while the lizard got away. He imagined this giant lizard's tail doing a lot of wiggling.

Billy moved to his feet to get a better angle on the thing, but as he did, it reared up and hissed with its tongue stuck way out. Then, as if it heard something, it turned its head and seemed to notice Tommy for the first time. Billy looked at his friend who seemed too scared to move. Then as if trying to decide, the lizard looked between Billy and Tommy and in one movement covered the short distance needed to catch his finger before he could react. Tommy let out a shriek that made Billy wonder if he himself had ever screamed like a girl. As he attempted to shake it loose he lifted the lizard off the ground and was swinging his hand violently. Billy imagined his finger wiggling on the ground if the lizard bit it off but before he could think any further, it just fell off his hand and lay there not moving. Both boys stood there looking at it wondering what to do next. Finally, the lizard righted itself and slowly crawled back to the pipe and disappeared inside. His finger looked puffy and discolored. His eyes, red and watery, stared in shock at the bite marks. Slowly it swelled up and started to turn into what looked like a purple balloon.

"Maybe we should go home now," Tommy whimpered.

He looked at him as he took his first step, then fell flat on his face.

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Billy wasn't sure if Tommy finally believed him about the froglegs or not, he never got to ask. His mom just wanted to know what he was doing playing with a Gila monster. "You should have known better", she yelled at him, "They're as poisonous as a rattler." Poisonous or not Billy would have liked to see his Gramma cook that thing in a pan with batter. That would have convinced Tommy for sure. But his friend never comes over anymore and Billy does all his exploring alone now.

Down the street by the corner is a big drainage ditch that has tadpoles swimming around in it. Tommy was the one who once told him that the tadpoles turn into frogs. Most of the tadpoles have already changed but a few still have tails. There are so many tiny frogs swimming around in the ditch that he can't count them all. He wonders how high someone missing a finger can count. As it gets darker outside and cools off, many of the frogs make their way up the bank and onto the warm sidewalk. Seeing so many of them he guesses he could fill a couple jars full with them, but the boy isn't interested in catching them anymore.

Still wobbly on his new two-wheel bike, Billy pedals up the sidewalk to take a closer look, watching the frogs jump every which way. He doesn't know where they might be heading, but doesn't give it much thought. He rings his bell, then pedals on through the frog crossing. Some of the little frogs stick to his wheels while others are half-smushed to the sidewalk but still struggling to get to the other side. He stops his bike when he reaches a clearing, then looks back to see the path he's made. He lingers there for a moment, then wonders if maybe he's late for dinner. He's not. He never is.