

Catalpa Trees

Gramps says bamboo fishing poles alone is ample proof, but to further reveal his true nature, God made the catalpa tree for growing fishing worms. He told me a catalpa tree was right there beside the apple tree in the Garden of Eden. Things would be a whole lot different if Adam had got to that catalpa tree first and gone fishing like God intended, instead of listening to Eve about that apple.

Mister Shumpert, the farm next over from Gramps, is blessed with two giant catalpa trees in his backyard. That's where me and Gramps headed on the morning of Confederate Memorial Day. Each of us carried a long tapered pole over our shoulders and a five-gallon lard stand in our off hands. Gramps' bucket was still a quarter-full. He had in mind catching a mess of bream and then frying 'em up over an open fire before the rest of the crowd got there. My bucket was empty; that's where we was gonna put the worms.

Catalpa trees are purty in the spring when they're a bloom. But over in the middle of the summer, they get raggedy. The worms eat half of each leaf—not half the leaves, but half of each leaf. The veins in the leaves must be tough, so they leave that part sticking up like the skeleton of a hand. And then there are the purple and green seedpods—Gramps calls 'em Indian cigars—that dangle from the tips of the limbs. By Halloween, them seedpods have split open and dangle from the twisted limbs like gnarly fingers. Them trees look spooky even in the daytime.

Gramps boosted me up to the crotch of the first limb, and I shinnied on my belly out along the limb till I got to the worms. They're little fuzzy caterpillars about an inch long, black with yellow stripes, and a shiny knob on one end for a head.

There were millions of 'em. If I tried to pick one off a leaf, it curled up and fell to the ground, so when I found one, I'd pluck off the whole leaf and drop it. Gramps caught the leaf in the empty lard bucket. It wasn't long before we were off through the pasture toward Berg's Lake.

"If'n we catch one fish for every two worms, we can feed the whole camp, I figure," Gramps said. The bream were still on-bed the day before when my buddy Mickey and me was down there, so I speculated we'd catch all we wanted. I started to run ahead, but Gramps called me back.

"You ain't gettin' no head start. We'll throw in at the same time and we'll see if 'n I don't catch more. The Coon-on-a-Log won't start 'til after noon, so we'll have two or three hours to catch a mess before we start a fire."

Berg's Lake is the campground for the community. The Baptist men built a bunch of picnic tables under the trees and they hold services there in the hot summer. It's convenient for the baptizing. And the Pentecostals have revivals there. Me and Mickey snuck off down there one night in the fall to watch. Mickey said they speak in tongues, roll around on the ground, and handle snakes and such. They'd stirred up a cloud of dust around their bonfire, but Mickey chickened out and wouldn't get close enough to see them handling the snakes.

The big event for the year is the Coon-on-a-Log held on Confederate Memorial Day, the last Monday in April. All the denominations turn out for that. That's like the World Series for coon dogs. All the coon hunters save up the coons they'd caught during the winter. When they knocked a coon from a tree, they beat back the dogs to keep it alive. Mister Riley kept four or five in cages behind his blacksmith shed that

he'd be a-bringing. It was gonna be a sight.

"Dad-burn, Bud! Did you bring a stringer? How we gonna keep them fish fresh if we ain't got no stringer? Run on back to the house and get some twine—or some balin' wire will do. You can be to the barn and back before I even get to the lake."

I took off at a run before I got suspicious and pulled up. "Now don't you start fishin' 'fore I get back."

"All right, I won't. I'll wait right here if'n you don't trust me. Just get on now."

When I got to the barn, I found a couple of wires that had been clipped off hay bales that would work fine. I was about to run back when I took notice of the apple trees beside the path from the barn to the house. The apples were still green, but they'd sure taste good sliced and fried up with the fish, so I started picking some into a feed sack.

As I worked my way toward the house, I heard the screen door slam and Granny come out the back door carrying the enamel pot she keeps on the back of the cook stove. That same pot has been on the back of the stove as long as I remember. She uses the hot water for washing dishes, or scalding the skins off tamaters, and such.

The way she struggled, both hands on the bail to keep it from sloshing, it musta been full. She carried it to her flowerbed beside the garden and slowly poured it out. The steam rose in front of her as the water hit the ground.

I couldn't figure it. If she was watering her flowers, she wouldn't use hot water. If she was just getting rid of dirty dishwater, she wouldn't be pouring it in her flowerbed. Them flowers was her pride and joy. She stood there a minute staring at

where she'd poured the water. I thought about running to the house to ask about it, but Gramps and fishing were waiting, so I threwed the apple sack on my shoulder and ran toward the lake.

We fished on the slough end of the lake where you could see the wallowed out holes of the bream beds. Gramps fished in the beds where Mickey and me had already caught 'em all out. I knew exactly where the bream were, so I caught the most. It didn't take long till we had as many as we could fry.

On the way back to the tables, Gramps and me picked up sticks to start a fire. Mister Riley and his mule had pulled a downed tree to the lake and he was busy with his ax lopping off limbs and chopping the trunk into a six-foot length. There was plenty of wood chips to burn.

Mister Riley is a blacksmith by day and a coon hunter by night. He's a big-chested man with kinky hair tuftin' out'a his overalls like he's half wild. His dogs were tied off to trees on one side of the campground and the coons were in cages on the other side. The other hunters started arriving with their dogs and coons and helped Mister Riley get ready.

Mickey's daddy is the strongest man around cepting for Mister Riley, so they waited till he showed up to roll the log in the water. After the log quit spinning and found its floating side, Mister Riley nailed a big fence staple in the middle. This is where he'd clip the coon's chain. Mister Riley waded out chest deep and anchored the log with a rope tied to a rock.

Granny walked up carrying a pail containing the rest of the fixings. Buster pranced alongside like he was escorting royalty. Buster's a collie with four white

feet and a blaze on his forehead; right handsome compared to them coon dogs that look like they been sleeping in a pig wallow. Buster sat on his rump with perfect manners watching all the goings-on, like it was all being put on for his benefit. That collie wouldn't have nothing to do with those coon dogs. He wouldn't even sniff tails with 'em. Granny said Buster don't want nobody thinking he's any kin to them dumb coon dogs.

Granny's pail contained the meal, and an onion, and buttermilk. She diced the onion and stirred it into the meal and buttermilk she'd mixed in her pail. She brought an extra Mason jar of cool buttermilk for me and Gramps to sip on while we built up the fire. When the fire burned down, Gramps pushed up some rocks around the coals and set his lard stand on 'em.

Me and Gramps gutted and scaled the bream with our pocketknives. We counted out thirty big ones before washing off the slime in the lake. Gramps dumped 'em, one at a time, into the hushpuppy batter before slipping 'em into the bubbling lard. They jumped around like they'd come back to life.

After the fish were cooked, Granny took over with the hush puppies. A spoonful of dough turned into a brown ball. I was at her elbow begging her to dip one out for me to taste. She said that turning brown don't mean they ain't raw in the middle. She couldn't explain how she knowed when they were done, but said it'd be one of those things I'd just know when I got older. I sliced up the apples and she threw 'em in there too. She wiped down one of the picnic tables with her apron and laid out the food in rows on a red-checkered oilcloth. She threw the hem of the cloth over the food to keep the flies off until time to eat.

By the time we finished cooking, the place had crowded up. The women laid out what food they brung while the men inspected the coons. They spit tobacco juice in their faces to see which had the most fight. Kids and dogs were running everywhere. Granny stood guard over the food with a willow switch. After Reverend Barker prayed for the souls of Confederate soldiers and blessed the food, we ate. Everything was ready for the show.

Mister Riley, wearing a leather shirt now and welder's gloves, drug the cage of the first coon to the water's edge. The coon bowed up and hissed like a tomcat. He convinced me to stand back. Mister Riley reached into the cage and held the coon's head down while he snapped a three-foot length of well chain onto its collar. It was the bravest thing I ever saw. He waded out to the log, pulling the coon thrashing in the water behind him. After clipping the chain to the log, the coon swam around trying to get away and eventually pulled itself up onto the log.

When the dogs heard the coon hissing, the whole bunch of 'em barked and lunged at their chains. You never heard such a racket. Each hunter picked one dog out'a his pack and held it by the collar at the water's edge until all the dogs were ready. Mister Riley gave the signal and then it was the hunters' turn to do the hollering. Each hunter had his own special hoot or whistle to rile his dogs to a frenzy. When the dogs still chained to trees heard those calls, they half strangled themselves to get in the action. Buster sat beside Granny and seemed only slightly mused by it all.

Some coons didn't last no time. They got snatched off'n the log by the first dog that swam out. Other times the dogs paddled round and round the log until they

gave out and, one at a time, headed back. When one of them dogs made it to shore, the owner snatched it up roughly by the collar, kicked it in the ribs, and drug it back to its chain. The other hunters laughed and pointed saying the dog wasn't worth the bullet to shoot it. But even if the coon won the first round, the hunters readied a fresh pack of dogs. Eventually, a dog got brave enough to grab the coon by the leg and while the coon was biting that dog, it would get dumped into the water and be finished off by the rest of the dogs. When the dogs swam back in, their snouts were dripping blood from the scratches and bites, but they didn't seem to mind.

I told Gramps this didn't seem like no fair contest.

Gramps explained, "bein' as a coon dog is the dumbest creature God ever created, and coons are nigh on the smartest, you had to use more'n one dog at a time to equal things out. And besides, this ain't about the coons at all. It's a contest 'tween the hunters to see who raised up the bravest dogs. And don't be feeling sorry for the coons, neither. Them coons would'a been cooked for supper months ago if'n it weren't for the hunters savin' 'em." Looking down at my snarl, Gramps patted my head. "It'll all make sense when you get growed up—when you look at it like a man does."

Mister Riley saved his best dog and the best coon for last. The big boar coon was half again bigger than the other coons and blacker and meaner looking. His ears were tattered and one eye milky. He was as big as the dogs.

Gramps told me, "Riley caught Bear hisself, but not 'fore he kilt his best dog. And that weren't Bear's first tussle neither. Every coon hunter inside twenty miles knows that coon and respectfully refers to him as Bear. Bear probably kills more

dogs every year than Mister Riley kills coons.”

Mister Riley let out a yelp when he snapped the chain to Bear’s collar. Bear was drug out of the cage with his bared teeth snarling at the crowd. Gramps lifted me up on a picnic table and stood in front of Granny in case he got a-loose. A dust cloud rose as he clawed the ground pulling against the chain. We was all relieved when Mister Riley finally drug him in the water and hooked him to the log. Upon reaching shore again, Mister Riley slung off the leather glove and blood poured out. Bear had got him good.

The dogs rounded the log several times, snapping at Bear’s legs, and got their noses sliced open by sharp claws for their effort. The dogs started back to shore—all but Mister Riley’s dog. He didn’t have the energy to lunge at Bear no more, but he wasn’t giving up. Bear jumped on the dog’s head and clamped onto his snout with his teeth before they both went underwater. The water swirled a time or two before Bear popped up and climbed back onto the log. The dog floated up later.

Granny was wrapping Mister Riley’s hand in a lard-soaked rag while he watched. When the hind end of his dog drifted to the surface, he jerked his hand away and rushed to the shore. I thought he was going to swim out to that log hisself. I believe he thought about it. Instead, he turned back to the crowd, tilted his head to the sky, and commenced to curse. The reverend was sitting right in front of him and there were women-folk all around, but he let out some awful words like he was by hisself out in a cornfield and chopped his toe with a hoe. He ran back through the crowd to the tree where his dogs were tethered and let them all loose. He shoosed ‘em into the water and sloshed in up to his knees to urge ‘em on. Those dogs had

been out before and were tired but still eager. As they dog-paddled around the log, Bear reached out and pushed their heads underwater until they was all drowned. Mister Riley, his mouth hanging open, his hand dripping blood in the water, watched the awful sight.

That's where he remained, him and Bear staring at each other across the water while everybody else quietly packed up to leave. Granny and Buster went to home, but I stayed with Gramps to see how things turned out. Gramps said if the hate passing between them two was turned into fire, the whole lake would be aboil.

The sun was headed down when Mister Riley picked up his ax and waded out toward the log. Bear stretched the chain to the far end of the log. Mister Riley arched back the ax and come down with all his might. The ax whacked through the chain and buried into the log. He left Bear and the ax teetering on the log and waded to shore. He didn't seem to be in a talking mood, so we didn't say nothing. He gathered up all his dog chains, mounted his mule, and galloped up the trail beside the lake.

Gramps said he figured them two would meet again. It would take Riley two years to raise up a new pack of hounds, but if Bear was still alive, Riley'd be after him. "Sometimes a man's just got to square things up and start over," he said. "You'll understand one day."

It was dusk when we got back to the barn. An oil lamp lit up the kitchen window. While I put up the poles in the barn, Gramps went on to the house. When I got there, he was over at the flowerbed on his knees, the same place Granny poured the water.

Before Granny went off to bed, she'd left white beans and cold chicken on the

kitchen table and a pone of cornbread warming on the stovetop. We would need buttermilk, so I got the jug from the icebox and some jelly glasses before I sat down. Gramps came in with a hangdog look.

“Bud, I figure it’s a sign. The good Lord must’a caught me a-sinnin’.” Gramps plopped in the chair across the table. “The first time I planted them catalpa cuttin’s out by the smokehouse, I figure it was the salt leachin’ into the soil what kilt ‘em. Then when I planted some more in the orchard and they died off, I thought the rotten apples had soured the soil. So last full moon, I got some volunteers from under Shumpert’s trees and transplanted ‘em to the flowerbed.

“Lee said she wasn’t abiding it; said catalpa trees was too ugly to have around the house. And if’n they took hold and grew, them worms would turn into sphinx moths that would flap every night at the screen door and slip in the house with the comings-and-goings and wind up in her cook pots, the churn, and everywhere.

“I told Lee that it’s every man’s birthright to have a worm tree in his yard. It’s all but promised in the Bible. I had to be the man of the house and put my foot down. You’ll see, when you get growed. Men make the decisions and women-folk just got to live with it. That’s in the Bible, too.”

A solitary moth fluttered around the globe of the lamp in the center of the table sending shadows crawling around the walls. Gramps reached out and swatted it like it was a demon sent to taunt him.

“Now them shoots I planted in the flowerbeds done shriveled up. That’s the best soil on the property. There ain’t no reason cept’n it’s a sign that I ain’t gonna be allowed no fishin’ worm trees. His ways is mysterious, but I reckon I’ll heed His

judgment.

“Will I understand when I get older, Gramps?”

Gramps took a swig of buttermilk and studied the white beans he had smashed on his plate with a fork. “Reckon not, Bud. Some things a man’s just gotta accept without knowin’ the why of it.”