

Third Picture

Fishing in the Delaware River

The river meandered along in front of the Regans' summer house, and on the opposite side was the Old Man's mountain.

What was it about that mountain? Coming from Long Island, I had never gotten within yelling distance of anything more than a hill. So why did this mountain look so familiar? I stretched my neck to look up and up at its rocky self mostly covered with evergreens.

"You'll fall over," Steven said.

I shrugged, reaching for my backpack. Inside were a bunch of colored pencils, stubby things I had collected wherever I could find them. It would take six of them, blues and greens and grays, to get the color of the river the way it was the first time I saw it.

"Do you know how to fish?" Steven asked.

"If I wanted to." I squinted at the river; didn't know how to fish, didn't know how to swim. I was still trying to figure out how to stay away from that water when the Old Man brought the fishing rods out of the shed.

Izzy Regan, the mother, came out onto the porch, the screen door slamming behind her. She waved at us. "Hey, guys, catch me something to go with pole beans and corn on the cob."

"Yuck to the beans," Steven said.

"I like pole beans," I said. I'd heard of polecats, but never pole beans.

Izzy nodded at me. "It's great to have a girl around, Holly. We have to stick together against these guys."

Izzy was the tallest woman I'd ever seen. Her blond hair was wrapped around her head, and she seemed to be smiling just for me.

And then we were down on the bank, barefoot, standing in the shade of a few scrub pines. The Old Man put a rod threaded with a lure into my hand. "The best one," he said. "This is for luck."

He showed me how to cast so my arm went back and over my head and the line sang out. I watched the feathery lure glide on the water, and then did it again, and again.

I could see the bottom of the river. I could stand on that soft sand dotted with rocks, I thought, and be safe. I put one foot into the cool water and then the other, feeling tiny fish nibbling at my ankles. Across the way was the mountain, tall and green.

"Pop's mountain," Steven said. "I'll show you tomorrow. There's a road going up ..."

The Old Man tightened his mouth. "Be careful of that road. I'm afraid of it."

Steven twitched one shoulder. "I'm not afraid of anything."

Anything, I thought. The stucco house woman seemed a world away.

We stood there, the Old Man pointing to a cat-fish nosing its way along, then a frog sunning itself on a rock, and I closed my eyes. I knew the East Branch of the Delaware River was home.

Like a miracle I caught my first fish that afternoon. Hooked it and watched the silver curve as it broke the surface of the water. It was a huge fish, and Steven said, "Bet you a buck you can't hold on to it."

He was right there with the net, though, wanting me to get it, as I slipped on the rocks, feeling the water on my legs and then my back as I slid. I tried to get my balance with one hand, my feet going out from under me, not sure how deep the river was, wondering if my head would go under.

Steven's arm was on my elbow then, holding me up, and the Old Man called, "You're all right, Hollis."

My feet anchored into the sand then. I edged myself back, pulling on the rod, and then the fish was mine.

Steven poured a pailful of cool water over my head so my hair was dripping, my clothes soaked. The Old Man was smiling, nodding, and Izzy came down to the bank to see what was going on.

Later I drew it all, and whenever I look at the picture I remember the taste of the fish that night, grilled on the coals, my feet bare under the porch table, and in front of us, the river. I remember Izzy touching my shoulder as she stood up to get something from the kitchen.

Why did I have to mess everything up?