

a Gentlemen's Agreement

Proof again that the right hand doesn't always know what the left hand is doing



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COMING UP THROUGH THE MEADOW with the night falling, following the narrow, tightly packed cow trail, the river sounding faintly through the dark and the heavy mist. Ahead of us, the wire fence and the car.

"What's the kind of fish I caught again, Daddy?"

"A dace."

"I wish we could have kept him. He was a beauty. But we only keep the fish you catch, right Daddy?"

"No, Michael. We keep the badly hooked fish and the ones we want to eat. We don't eat dace."

"I love fishing, Daddy."

"That's what matters most of all."

In the mist and the night, shapes move in the pasture ahead.

"Look! Horses!"

"No, Michael. They are cows."

"They're horses, Daddy. I'm sure of it."

"Sorry, little fella."

"Wanna bet?"

"Who taught you about betting?"

"Fifteen dollars, okay?"

"Have you got fifteen dollars?"

"No."

"I'll tell you what, if they're horses I'll pay you the fifteen dollars. But if they are cows, you lose, and you'll have to stay in your own yard to play. How do you feel about that?"

"For how long?"

"Well now . . . Let me see. Let's say—till you're thirty-five. That seems fair enough, doesn't it?"

"Shake, Daddy. It's not a bet until you shake hands."

"Your other hand, Michael. You always shake with your right hand."

Michael holding close, we move through the cows, slip the fence and climb the grass pitch to the car. We stow the rods and begin home.

"You're the very best fisherman I ever saw, Daddy. I just wanted you to know that."

"You're not so bad your self, little fella. You're a regular Theodore Gordon on Black Nose Dace."

"That's why I'm sorry about what I have to tell you."

"What are you talking about, Michael?"

"God. I have to tell you that I like God even better than I like you, Daddy."

The road dips with the feel of an air pocket, then continues.

"Well that's all right, little fella. I understand. Next time you need your shoes tied, you call God, okay. Next time your line gets snagged, maybe God'll help you. It'll make things easier all around."

"Don't be hurt, Daddy. Don't you know that God is inside everyone. When I love God, I love you at the same time. It's sort of a trick. Karen told me."

"I'm sorry for punishing God last week. Pass it on to Him, will you? On the other hand He had it coming."

"He understands, Daddy. He understands everything. That's His style."

The night was dark without a moon and thick with fog. The lights penetrated poorly and we drove slowly in the night.

"Did I remember the worms?"

"You put them in the back with the fishing poles. Don't you remember?"

"Michael, you wouldn't eat those worms, would you. You know enough not to eat worms, don't you?"

"Of course not. Only fish eat worms, right?"

"You haven't been taking them out of the washtub in the barn have you? You wouldn't eat them?"

"No, Daddy. I never even thought about eating them."

"That's good."

"Maybe Karen's been eating them."

"I'll ask her. Remind me."

"What are you laughing about, Daddy?"

"Nothing, little fella. Just something I thought about."

"Daddy, I didn't want to tell you this, but you know when you went down the stream to fish and left me on the rock?"

"Yes."

"Well, I had a big one."

"How did you know?"

"I felt him and I could see him. Because the pole bent right over and it started to go up and down. It almost dragged me into the water."

"Why didn't you reel him in?"

"I did, Daddy, and when I just about had him, he flopped off. I don't think you put a big enough hook on my line."

"How does your pal, God, feel about

telling lies?"

"I think that fish was a lot bigger than the ones you caught, Daddy. It was more like the ones that Grampy caught."

"Those were shad, Michael. Shad don't run in this river."

"Well, one thing for sure. It was no dace."

"Why did you say you didn't want to tell it to me—about the big fish you almost caught? Is it because you thought I would think you made it up?"

"It's not that too much. Well, you know how you are . . ."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You don't like to be outdone."

"Who told you such a thing?"

"Mommy."

"She told you that!"

"Not exactly. She told Mrs. Moon on the telephone, and I heard her. It's true, isn't it?"

"Of course not."

On the stretch of highway which slashed smoothly through the hills above the fog, we ran quickly in a thinning night. He slept, awakening as the car turned onto the narrow road to home.

"Why are you crying, Michael?"

"My friends will all be grown up."

"We all grow up, and get old. And eventually we die. It's the nature of life."

We must accept it," I said wisely.

"They'll all laugh at me."

"Why do you think they'll laugh at you?"

"I'll be the only one not allowed to leave the yard."

"Have you learned a lesson, then?"

"Yes, Daddy. They were cows, just like you said they were."

"No, about gambling. Betting. It doesn't pay to bet, does it?"

"No," he said.

"Well as long as you've learned something. Just stay in the yard for one day, okay."

"Thank you, Daddy," he said with absolutely no tears whatsoever. "But if you ever do bet, you shake with your right hand, right?"

He sleeps again, but awakens from the light of the door and the engine stopping. She's there in the yellow kitchen light with Karen next to her.

"Don't tell her about me falling off the rock into the water, okay, Daddy."

"Why not, Michael?"

"Because I want to tell her about it myself."

"Michael."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"We won't tell her that you were all alone on the rock when I needed to fish downstream, all right?"

"Okay, Daddy. You want to tell her yourself, right?"

"That's right, little fella." ■





PRE-SEASON ISSUE / 1975

Volume Six • Number Two

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