

AYERS RATLIFF

The Frognappers

A TAN, THREE-BEDROOM ranch house on Bursley Road, trimmed with a partial white brick front with an attached barn garage is what the frognappers call home. The frognappers are a six year old boy named Bryan and an eleven-year-old girl named Mandi. Mandi and Bryan's two older siblings are gone a lot, being out with their friends. Their dad is at work a majority of the time at the family business. Their mom is home with them almost all the time, but is always busy with home chores or working in the basement, as she is in charge of all the bookwork for their business and her office is in the basement.

The frognappers are forced to amuse themselves a lot. This is easy for them to do, as they live about a quarter of a mile from their favorite place in the world, the frog pond. The frog pond is a small body of water, just to the side of Clark Road, which perpendicularly intersects with Bursley about five hundred feet from Mandi and Bryan's house.

On this August afternoon, just after eating chipped ham sandwiches, with mus-

tard in the shape of a smiley face on the bread, chips and pop, the froggnappers get up from the table and head out to the garage. The garage door opens, as it does many summer afternoons, and out comes Mandi and Bryan on their red Huffy bikes, pedaling down the stone driveway, each carrying a white, five gallon bucket. As they look down to see inside their empty buckets their eyes grow big. They can already see the frogs, jumping around in the bottom and they cannot wait to go and nap some frogs from the pond. As they pedal their bikes out of the driveway and onto Bursley Road their thoughts of filling their buckets with frogs are only briefly interrupted with a thought of watching for cars. Their heads are always packed with dreams of filling these buckets, even though they usually come back with the same amount of frogs as they leave with: zero. But sometimes they luck out and catch a frog or two.

Pedaling is so much easier on the paved country road and takes much less effort than pedaling in the deep, stony driveway.

"Race ya!"

Mandi speeds away with Bryan pedaling as fast as he can behind her. Mandi always starts their races and she always starts them to her advantage, so she can never be beaten. If Bryan starts a race, Mandi says "I'm not racing," or "That's not fair," and the race is over, then when she catches up to her brother, she'll say "Now!" so she will have her momentum going and be able to get a good head start, being sure to win. Bryan, being younger, will sometimes cry or complain or tell mom on Mandi that she is cheating, but most of the time he just tries as hard as he can to win the race.

By the time they get to the frog pond both of them are panting like dogs on this hot summer day. They lay down their bikes in the tall grasses that surround the small pond and then lay down on the cement slab that sits between the road and

the small body of water. Upon arrival the frogs do their usual "ribbit, ribbit, ribbit, ribbit, ribbit," as they jump from the sides into the water. The frogs do this every time Mandi and Bryan come to the pond, but by the time they catch their breath, some of the frogs are back on the sides again.

After catching their breath, they sit up and hang their feet down the two-foot drop from the concrete slab to the pond. The pond is well-shaded by a weeping willow tree and is nestled between the road, which seldom gets any traffic, and a gigantic cornfield. This body of water is almost exactly circular, as if someone had made its boundaries with a giant compass. The pond is about a foot and a half deep and is about the size of the circular contraption of a pony ride, seen at almost every county fair.

Gazing into the pond, Mandi's eyes get so big that her sockets can hardly hold her eyeballs when she sees it.

"Look at that!" she whispers.

"What?"

"That!" pointing her finger across the pond.

When he sees it too, his eyes become as large as hers, but neither of their eyes are as large as the frog that their eyes are fixated on. They have to have it!

"Wow, it's the biggest frog I've ever seen!"

"Let's get it!"

"How are we going to get over there?" Bryan sees no way to get this frog, as it is on the other side of the pond, and the only way they have of catching frogs is right off the cement slab or directly beside it. All the other ground surrounding the pond is too swampy to get through.

"I have an idea," Mandi explains to Bryan that if he sails across in his bucket, he can catch the frog.

"No way!"

"Yes, it'll work."

"What if I tip over?"

"Hurry up!"

"I can't."

"Come on. Get in. Stop being a baby!"

"Mandi, please."

"Really, are you going to be a big baby?"

"I can't."

"I'm leaving."

"Don't go."

"Well . . .," Mandi thinks for a moment before she begins speaking again. "What about this?" Bryan attentively listens to her new idea.

Bryan thinks Mandi's new idea of how he can protect himself is brilliant. So he races off, heads back to the house, while Mandi stays and keeps an eye on the frog.

Bryan runs into the house and searches and searches through the closet in his bedroom for his snowsuit. Surely his snowsuit would protect him if something happened, so he puts it on and runs back outside into the ninety degree sun, to scamper back to the frog pond and nap that frog.

Pedaling as hard as he can, he reaches the pond.

"Is it still there?"

"Ya, hurry."

Bryan leaps off of his bike and kneels down on the concrete slab, lowering his bucket into the pond.

"I don't know about this, Mandi."

"Do it."

When the bottom of the bucket connects with the pond's surface, the water looks as nervous as Bryan, as the movement of its ripples mimic the shaking of Bryan's hands.

"You are going to help me, right?"

"Come on."

Mandi helps to steady Bryan as he slowly lowers his right leg towards the bucket. Bryan's eyes become glossier and redder the closer his foot reluctantly becomes with the bucket's hollow opening. Finally, the bottom of his shoe meets the bottom of the bucket. The plastic container

starts to shake and rock, moving slightly away from the cement slab.

"Oh, Mandi!"

Having one foot in the unstable bucket and the other on the cement slab, Bryan cannot keep his balance. Over it goes, with him going with it. His legs spread like a gymnast completing a routine. The splits, the scream, the splash, the yell! Enough tears begin flowing from Bryan's eyes that the pond may have been made two feet deeper.

"Get up!"

"This is gross!"

The ooze and mud that lay on the bottom of the pond, under the unclear water feels like quicksand to Bryan, as he thinks he is being sucked in.

"Help me!"

"Get up!"

He had never been this close to the water before and had never noticed its foul odor. Bryan gags and tries to hold his breath to keep from puking.

"Get up!"

He puts his hands on the bottom of the pond to help lift himself to his feet and quickly retracts his arm when he feels the mushy surface. Trying to raise himself without his hands, he stumbles and falls back in again.

"Get up!"

"I can't!"

"Stop being stupid, get up!"

He finally finds the strength to raise himself out of the water. Exiting the pond a darker color than he was upon entering it, he is soaked, dirt is caked all over his body.

"You look like the Mud Monster!"

"Shut up!"

"You did the splits," Mandi cannot contain her laughter.

"Shut up Mandi!"

"I can't help it."

"I'm telling Mom!"

Both of them ride back to the house carrying empty buckets and Bryan, wearing

a soaked snowsuit, still bawling and yelling like a banshee, with his screams becoming louder and louder the closer to home they become.

"Be quiet. Mom will hear you."

"Good! Shut up."

When they reach the driveway their mom meets them outside.

"What happened?"

Bryan spills his story as fast as he was spilled out of the bucket.

"So you tried to float across in that bucket?" Mom asks smiling.

"It's not funny!"

"I know it's not. Let's get this off of you and get you into the tub."

Bryan's mom goes in, lays down a path of towels from the front door to the bathroom and runs bathwater for him to soak in. He follows her inside.

"Let's get all those yucky clothes off."

Bryan sheds his layers of clothes and puts all of them into a big lump on the linoleum bathroom floor. He leaves the sopping pile of shoes, socks, pair of shorts, underwear, t-shirt and snowsuit, then moves over and steps into the tub. The water acts like a knife to a potato, peeling the dirt from his skin and revealing a clean, white flesh.

From all the washed-off dirt, the bathwater turns a shade of muddy brown. The muddy brown water reminds Bryan of the pond water. Disgusted, thinking about laying in the dirty pond water, he stands up and begins to get out of the tub to go ask his mom to run a clean tub of water. He looks down at the ground he is about to step on, then notices a little frog jumping out of the hood of his snowsuit. Excitingly, he goes over and catches the little frog.

"You must have jumped into my hood when I was in the water."

He puts the little frog into the dirty tub of water, then gets in too, to finish his bath with his new friend. Being so excited about the frog, he forgets about the muddy

brown water.

"I think I'll wear my suit when I go back tomorrow!"

Bryan finishes his bath, gets dressed and goes outside to play with his new green friend. When Mandi notices that Bryan is playing, and not playing with her, she goes over to see what he is doing.

"Where did you get that frog?"

"I think my snowsuit has special powers."

"Let me see it."

"No. I'm not playing with you."

"Duh, let me see it."

"No. He's nicer than you and I'm playing with him and not with you."

"Fine. I'm going to go do something funner."

"And you're not allowed to wear my snowsuit either!"