

ETHAN TALKS TO DANIEL ABOUT HEAVEN, HELL, AND RELIGION

“Nah, nah. Not like that. He’ll just come off.” Daniel took the hook and worm out of Ethan’s hands. “You got to thread it right through him.” He put one end of the worm to the sharp end of the hook, and deftly slid the worm on, so that when he was done, hook and worm seemed all of a piece. He cast the line out into the river. He handed Ethan a second hook and line. “Here, now you do it.”

Ethan’s worm slid out of his grasp and tumbled into the grass, where it squirmed blindly, seeking a hiding place.

“Do it again. And don’t stick yourself.”

Ethan picked up the struggling worm. He held worm and hook up close to his face, like Ma eyeing a needle for threading. This time the hook stuck, although the worm ended up gathered sloppily along it like a stocking that had fallen down around somebody’s ankle. He held it out for Daniel’s inspection.

Daniel squinted one eye at the mess on the end of the line. “It’ll do. Now toss it in.”

Ethan cast the bait out as hard as he could. It landed with a satisfying plunk a few yards from Daniel’s, the cork floaters bobbing in tandem on the surface.

“Now what?”

Daniel eased himself back in the grass and pulled his cap down over his eyes. “We wait.”

“Oh.” Ethan drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He watched the lines for a few minutes. Nothing happened.

“Daniel—”

“Mmm-hmm?”

“Why don’t you go to meeting with the Lymans?”

Daniel shoved his cap back with his thumb and squinted at Ethan with one pale gray-green eye. “You know it’s not me own church.”

“But—but aren’t you afraid?”

“Afraid of what?”

“Hell. Mr. Merriwether says—”

“How do you know he’s right? Maybe it’s you lot as are all going to hell.” Daniel tugged his hat back down over his eyes.

Ethan’s stomach felt cold and heavy. That couldn’t be. They couldn’t all be wrong, Ma and Pa and Mr. Merriwether, and—and everybody.

The corner of Daniel’s mouth twitched. “Don’t worry, lad. I’ll be right down there with you. I ain’t heard a Mass nor seen a priest for five years or longer.”

The line at the end of Daniel’s pole jerked tight. He sat upright and shoved his cap back. He teased the line, tugging it and letting it go slack, testing what was on the end. Whatever it was pulled back. He jumped to his feet and struggled with the line for a few minutes, then drew in a shimmering silver-sided fish about ten inches long. He gave Ethan one of his rare grins. “Ain’t very big, but it’s something.”

More serious questions dulled Ethan’s pleasure in the catch. “Aren’t you afraid?” he asked.

Daniel eased the fish free of the hook, then pulled a ball of twine from his pocket. “Cut me a piece,” he told Ethan. “Fraid of what?”

Ethan measured out an arm’s length of twine and cut it off with his pocketknife. “Hell.”

“I got enough to be afraid of in this life without fretting over the next, don’t I now?” Daniel ran the twine through the gasping fish’s gills. He tied a loop to secure the fish, then fastened the free end of the line to a bush that straggled over the river’s edge.

That couldn’t be right, Ethan thought. He’d never seen Daniel afraid of anything. Not the mare, not the Lymans’ prize bull, nor the sow when she was nursing. Not even Mr. Lyman. Yesterday, during their punishment, Ethan was certain it wasn’t fear he’d seen in Daniel’s bowed head and lowered eyes, but only resignation.

Daniel set the tethered fish in the water and handed Ethan the hook to bait.

Ethan chewed his lower lip as he pondered the fate of Daniel’s soul. Maybe he really was a heathen, after all. “Don’t you believe it? Heaven and hell and all that?”

“Dunno. But if I could make me own heaven, I’d put no Lymans in it.”

“What would be in it?”

Daniel leaned back in the grass. “Lots of Sunday afternoons to fish. And horses. Lots of horses.”

Ethan laughed. The worm slid onto the hook more easily this time, with only a few puckers in the middle. “And hell? Do you think there’s a hell? Do you think there’s fire and sulfur and people burning forever, like Mr. Merriwether says?”

Daniel sat up slowly and stared out across the river. He hugged his knees to his chest as if he’d suddenly grown cold. When he finally spoke, Ethan could barely hear him.

“Oh, aye. There’s fire all right,” Daniel said. “Fire and mothers and babies crying and naught you can do about it.”

ETHAN TALKS TO SILAS ABOUT RELIGION

“Is it true what Mr. Merriwether says about Papists, that they’re heathens and idolatrous and all that? That they’re not even Christians? Do you think it’s true that people like them go to hell?”

Silas held up a hand against Ethan’s cascade of questions. “What I think isn’t going to make a difference whether somebody’s saved or not.”

Ethan chewed his lip. “It doesn’t seem fair, that somebody would go to hell just for belonging to the wrong church.”

“They seemed like decent people,” Silas said.

It didn’t matter, though, did it? Ethan thought. That’s what the minister said. Being decent didn’t count for anything if you believed the wrong things. He felt heartsick for Daniel’s family. But Daniel, he could still be saved. Was that what Mr. Lyman meant? “What about Daniel? Will he go to hell?”

Silas’s face hardened, as if he’d drawn a set of shutters closed against something. For a moment he looked almost as old as his father. “There’s worse things a boy can have on his soul than belonging to the wrong church.”