

NEVER GO HOME WITHOUT A FISH

By Gretchen Woelfle

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“**LET’S GO FISHING** tomorrow,” Christopher said to Uncle Johnathan. They had finished the haying, and Christopher had two more days before Uncle Johnathan would hitch up the buggy and take him home.

“Good idea,” his uncle replied. “We’ll pack our food tonight and leave before dawn.”

Uncle Johnathan never went home without a fish, so he carried enough food to last the whole day: bread, butter, and salt pork for breakfast; more of the same with cheese and apple pie for lunch; and doughnuts for snacks in between. “I don’t weigh 260 pounds by eating light,” Uncle Johnathan allowed.

Christopher had a big appetite, like most ten-year-olds, but Uncle Johnathan’s was even bigger.

At the shore Christopher cut saplings for fishing poles. “Thick as my index finger on one end, thin as a pencil at the tip,” said Uncle Johnathan. They attached twenty feet of linen line and tied hooks on the end.

Christopher rowed to their favorite cove. He filled a bucket with water and lowered a sieve into the lake. He threw bread crumbs on the surface, and soon a school of minnows swarmed to eat the crumbs. Christopher raised the sieve and dropped the minnows into the bucket.

“Good start,” said Uncle Johnathan.

The sun rose as they baited their hooks, cast their lines, and watched a kingfisher dive for its breakfast.

They ate their breakfast. Morning came and went. No fish. “Nothing’s happening,” complained Christopher.

“Fishing is mostly waiting,” said his uncle as they rowed ashore for lunch.

Uncle Johnathan poked through the lunch bucket. “I’m tired of salt pork,” he said. “Fried fish will taste mighty good for supper.”

Uncle Johnathan got ready for a nap. He stuck his pole in the sand and made a contraption out of sticks and string and a spare fishhook that would lift his hat if he got a bite.

“Never let the fish know you’re sleeping,” he said.

Christopher stuck his pole in the sand, too, but he needed his hat for picking blueberries. He filled it nearly full, but the tiny berries tasted so good, he ate half a hatful before Uncle Johnathan woke up.

“Save some for later,” his uncle said. “We won’t go home without a fish.”

During the afternoon they anchored near a ledge and floated in the weeds. They rowed toward the narrows and fished with worms as well as minnows.

“I hate waiting,” Christopher said. “I’m going for a swim.” He swam around the boat. He dove underneath and thumped the bottom to give Uncle Johnathan a start. Finally he climbed back into the boat.

“Good night for fishing,” said his uncle looking at the sky.

“We can wait all night for a fish, right, Uncle Johnathan?” Christopher tried to keep the excitement out of his voice.

They ate leftover lunch for supper and watched the sun set behind the hills. A breeze made orange and pink ripples on the water, and a great blue heron glided by.

“Hoo ooo ooo ooo” called a loon. “Hoo ooo ooo ooo” came an answer across the lake. Stars came out. Christopher picked out constellations—the Big Bear, the Little Bear, Leo the Lion.

“Tell me about the ice-skating contest,” Christopher said. It was his favorite story and it had happened right here on the lake.

“All the other skaters were young and lean. I was middle-aged and fat.” His uncle chuckled. “They dragged logs onto the ice and took turns jumping. One log, then two, four, eight, twelve logs. They laughed every time I took my turn but I laughed back.”

Christopher could picture Uncle Johnathan heaving his big body from side to side, swinging his arms back and forth.

“At sixteen logs only three skaters were left, and one was me. At nineteen logs another man fell. Then there was just young Peter Bixby and me. We both jumped twenty logs. Then at twenty-one, Peter caught his skate and skidded for fifty feet. You should have heard him howl.” Christopher laughed. He loved what came next.

“Then it was my turn” Uncle Johnathan continued, “and I cleared it. For good measure, I went and jumped over another one. Twenty-two logs. No one has beaten my record yet.”

Uncle Johnathan chuckled. “Life gives you things you never expect,” he mused, “and sometimes it doesn’t give you what you have every right to expect—like a fish for dinner!” He paused. “Horned pouts come out at night. They’ll taste good for breakfast.”

Uncle Johnathan kept fishing. Christopher lay down with his jacket under his head. The rocking boat lulled him to sleep. He awoke to hear Uncle Johnathan singing.

I’m lonesome since I crossed the hill,
And o’er the moor and valley;
Such heavy thoughts my heart do fill,
Since parting with my Sally.
I seek no more the fine and gay,
For each does but remind me
How swift the hours did pass away
With the girl I left behind me.

That was something Christopher didn’t expect. He’d never heard his uncle sing before. The boy felt he was floating ... above the boat ... above the earth ... When he woke again, Uncle Johnathan was asleep with his fishing pole in his hand.

The moonlight wiggled on the lake like a giant silver snake. Christopher swished his hand through the water. It felt warm. A bat whooshed past, and a solitary fish splashed across the lake. He remembered his uncle’s lonesome song. Had Uncle Johnathan ever had a sweetheart?

Christopher lay down and went back to sleep. Mist was swirling around the boat when he woke again. He saw a rosy glow in the east. Uncle Johnathan was still sleeping, his head on his chest.

The moon grew dim as the sky brightened. Finally the sun burst over the pine trees and blazed on the water, scattering the mist. Christopher jumped into the lake and came up hollering. The cold water had chased the sleepiness from his body.

Uncle Johnathan woke with a start and dropped his fishing pole overboard. Christopher laughed so hard he swallowed water and started sputtering.

“When you’re done laughing, would you mind fetching my pole?” his uncle asked. “It’s floating away.”

With a few strong strokes, Christopher caught the pole, then lay on his back and swam back to the boat. “Never let a fish catch you sleeping, Uncle Johnathan.”

“Humph,” grunted his uncle, but the corners of his mouth turned up.

Christopher saw two soggy doughnuts and some blueberries in the bucket. “Blueberries or doughnuts?” he asked.

“Save the best for last. We won’t go home without a fish,” his uncle said as he reached for a doughnut.

At noon they ate the blueberries. Christopher’s feet fell asleep. He rubbed them against the boat. “Have you ever fished this long before?” he asked.

“Nope.” Uncle Johnathan pressed his lips together.

“Well,” said Christopher, “life gives us things we never expect.”

He was daydreaming about creamy fish chowder, when he felt a tug on his line. A yellow perch thrashed about underwater, its golden flanks glittering in the sunlight.

“Easy there,” his uncle said. Christopher played the line out, then brought it in. The perch swam to the rocks. If the line snagged, the fish might get away.

Uncle Johnathan rowed so Christopher could pull the fish straight out of the water. His uncle caught it in the net, and Christopher dropped the perch into the pail.

“Well done,” said Uncle Johnathan.

An arrow of orange afternoon light shot across the lake.

“Can we go home,” Christopher asked, “if I give you my fish?”

Uncle Johnathan didn’t speak, but Christopher knew—Uncle Johnathan had to catch his own fish.

A few minutes later Christopher cried, "I've got it! Uncle Johnathan, is there any salt pork left?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Is there?"

"Just a hunk of rind."

"Well, then, we'll give the fish something they don't expect." Christopher took out his pocketknife. "I'll carve a frog from the pork rind!"

"By golly, why didn't I think of that?" exclaimed Uncle Johnathan.

"Because we've been saving the best till last," said the boy.

Christopher carved his frog, scraping away the last bit of fat from under the legs. When he shook it, the frog body was firm, but the legs wiggled. It might fool a fish.

Christopher attached the frog to the hook, and Uncle Johnathan pulled it to and fro on the water. It skittered among the lily pads.

Suddenly a fish grabbed for it. Uncle Johnathan pulled his line, but the fish got away.

"I'll row in a circle," Christopher said. "We know he's in there."

Back and forth Uncle Johnathan guided his frog. The lily pads trembled.

Splash! The fish bit the frog's leg, then vanished.

"Third time lucky," muttered Uncle Johnathan, pulling the frog a little quicker.

Snap! The fish grabbed the whole frog in its mouth. Uncle Johnathan eased the fish closer, then pulled it out of the water. It was a smallmouth bass, his favorite.

"Hooray for Uncle Johnathan!" shouted Christopher, stamping his feet.

His uncle looked at the two fish in the bucket. "Well, we've got our fish ..."

Christopher chimed in, "So can we go home!"

Johnathan Ames really weighed 260 pounds, jumped over twenty-two logs on ice skates, and stayed out fishing for thirty-six hours, until he caught a fish on Damariscotta Lake in Maine.