

FICTION STORIES

Fishing

by Keith Loveland, FSPE



Tom Venner taught me everything I know about fishing in the Mississippi River. “Think about it from their point of view,” is how he explained it to me. “Cast your line where they’re likely to be,” he said. “You’ll catch more that way.”

I was wet from my knees down to my toes, wading upstream towards the falls which gave this village its name, Big Rapids. Most of me was staying dry. My socks were in a back pocket of my blue jeans, and I had tied the laces of my sneakers together and slung them around my neck.

“Cast upstream; your lure will drift downstream naturally,” Tom had advised. I always followed his advice, casting upstream, away from the rising sun. I reeled in enough line to keep it tight, jigging every few seconds, hoping a nice, fat bass would become my morning breakfast.

I fished early, before most villagers were out and about. Standing in cold water early in the morning gave me time to think as I waited for a bite. In the middle of an exciting daydream—me as a star player for the Minnesota Twins—I felt resistance on my line and saw the rod bowed down. The water rippled as I walked backwards

out of the river, slowly dragging something too heavy to be reeled in. My blood went cold as I realized it was a human body.

Dropping my rod, I pulled the body onto the grassy bank. Definitely a woman and definitely dead. I ran back to the gas station where I worked, which is right next door to the old hotel where I live. Tom Venner was sitting in the office, waiting for some customer to drive in. He put down his newspaper, listened to my story without interrupting, and dialed the village police station.

“Chief? Tom Venner here. Dead body in the river just behind the hotel.”

As we walked back to the corpse, Tom told me that a dead body in the water sinks as the air in its lungs is replaced with water, then later floats to the surface, face down, as gases form in the gut. I had no reason to doubt him, since he’d been in World War II and Korea. Almost everything I knew about human anatomy I’d learned in Mr. Swanson’s tenth-grade biology class.

Chief Kaiser called out, “Don’t touch anything,” as he scrambled down the embankment.

“Haven’t touched a thing, Bill,” Tom replied.

The chief walked quickly to where we stood, looked down at the body, then gave me a questioning glance. “What’s the story here?”

I pointed to where my lure was snagged on the dead woman’s swimsuit strap. “I pulled her out of the water, ran to tell Tom, and he called you.”

Chief Kaiser rubbed his chin, “You see anything before that?”

“No, sir.”

“Not much of a talker, are you?”

“Nothing else to say, sir.”

There was a short pause as Chief Kaiser bent down, rolled the body over, and exhaled sharply. “My god, it’s Teddy Friedman.”

Tom leaned in for a look. “That’s her, Bill. Got a bullet hole in the middle of her chest. Looks like she’s been in the water for a bit.”

The chief gave me a hard stare, pulled a pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket, lit one, and puffed deeply before saying, “So, did you know her?”

“I had a class with her in school,” I said.

The chief looked surprised. “How old are you anyway, kid?”

I told him I was 16, but it didn’t stop him from staring at me. And I couldn’t stop staring at Teddy Friedman. She’d been one of a trio of the coolest girls in the school, a real girly girl, curvy and flirty—a cheerleader, homecoming princess, a heartbreaker. She’d just graduated and was going to go away to school. Everyone knew these things about Teddy Friedman. And she was always out and about in town. I’d seen plenty of her. She was nobody you’d ever think would end up shot to death in the river.

“Was she going with anybody?” the Chief asked.

“Gosh, I couldn’t say.” I didn’t know, really.

“Well, kid, maybe you come with me and give me a list of some people we can start talking to.”

“I don’t think I can help you with that. She was two years ahead of me in school. And I didn’t hang with her crowd.” I had no interest or intention of being at the village police station. I was always just trying to look normal.

“You’re not going anywhere, are you?” the Chief asked, snubbing his Camel out in the grass.

“Just to the Bovey Farmer’s Day,” I said.

It was Labor Day, after all, and I never missed the Bovey parade. The year before, I'd made myself something of a local hero. A guy tried to park his car where there wasn't enough space, bumping a pickup truck hard enough that the truck started rolling down the street. I saw it happen, leaped off the bridge overpass—where I had been waiting for the parade—and landed in the truck bed. I managed to catch my breath, step on the running board, open the driver's door, and steer it away from a crowd of people on the beach at the bottom of the hill. There was a lot of screaming as I slammed on the brakes and screeched to a stop.

The local newspaper wrote an article about the whole thing, and one of the Lutheran pastors in town delivered a sermon about me the next Sunday. He called it "The Fearless Flying Boy." I got some friendly ribbing in school; some called me "Fearless," for a while. I remember that day every now and then, mostly when I feel a twinge in my collarbone.

But, clearly, Chief Kaiser did not know my story.

Tom and I stayed with the chief until the village coroner arrived. The four of us lifted Teddy's body onto a stretcher, carried it up the embankment, and slid the stretcher into the back of the large black station wagon. The coroner looked at Chief Kaiser and said, "I'll call you later, Bill. For now, she'll be listed as a homicide victim, perpetrator unknown." Bill nodded as they shook hands.

The coroner then looked at Tom and asked, "Why do people kill each other?"

Tom murmured, "Only during a war."

Bill got back in his police car, rolled down his window, and said to me, "Don't go anywhere."

I nodded but didn't say a word as he eased away from the curb, did a sharp U-turn, and followed the coroner's station wagon. Tom and I walked the short distance back to his gas station, and he returned to the table where he'd been when I brought him the sad news.

"You go see that parade, Aaron," he said. "I can handle things here until you get back." He took a sip of his coffee, cold by now, and resumed reading the newspaper. I said goodbye and went next door to the hotel. My room is number 306, on the third floor, windows facing east overlooking the river. As I washed up and changed clothes, I tried to collect my thoughts. I'd never seen a murder victim before. I'd seen plenty in movies, read lots of murder mysteries; but dragging Teddy's cold body out of the river was a first for me.

She and Frederica Schmitt had driven into Tom's gas station just three days before, on Friday afternoon. I had overheard her saying, "I'm never coming back to Big Rapids. I'm getting out of here and traveling the world; you know I am."

"Me, too," was all Freddie had said, repeating it again and again, as if to make it more likely to come true.

I'd smiled at them as I pumped the gas, lifted the hood to check the oil, and washed the bugs off their windshield. But they didn't see that. Teddy just said, "Charge it. Old Mister Venner will know who should pay." She made the tires squeal as she roared away.

I could have told Chief Kaiser about that conversation. But, as I said before, I was just trying to stay under the radar in those days. Just be normal. That was enough for me to handle. 