

The Trapped and Tangled Loon

by Kim Hanson

“Pass me a woolly buggar, will ya?” I asked my cousin Isaiah.

“I'm using it. Try a hopper, it'll work just as good,” he said.

Since I didn't feel much like arguing with him, I pulled a hopper from our shared tackle box. Standing at the lake's edge, I cast my line onto the smooth-as-glass water of Police Outpost Lake.

Down the shoreline, Uncle Rick was knee-deep into the water, parked in front of a bank of evergreen trees. He liked to fish alone, away from distractions and noise and other people.

I'd learned to fish from my Dad. He'd taught me to fish alone, in silence, lost in my own thoughts. Like meditation. He'd taught me everything I knew about fishing. Then, he passed away.

Isaiah shouted, “Dad, where should I stand?”

Uncle Rick pressed his index finger to his pursed lips, pointed to a shady spot by a large rock and shook his head gently. “He wants us to be quiet or else we won't catch any fish,” I whispered. Isaiah frowned, pouting, but it was 'message received'.

The tent trailer was parked in the best spot of the deserted campground. Mid-week, even in late August, no one was around here. Southern Alberta is mainly farmer's fields, horses and open blue sky.

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Police Outpost Lake is as far south as you can go. In fact, the adjacent protected wetlands run along the

perimeter of the lake and border on the State of Montana. Mystical Chief Mountain looms on the horizon, standing guard over all its shadows.

Song birds, ducks and Canada geese floated by on the breeze, touching down on the water's surface, flapping and quacking their way back up into the sky. Clouds...fluffy and gauzy, passed in front of the sun, temporarily blocking its warming rays.

“Why do I have to be so quiet?” asked Isaiah “All those birds are making way more noise than I ever could!”

I ignored him. Pulling back on my rod, squinting into the glare of the sun, I remembered my Dad's words. “Jacob, gently bring your rod back. Pause on the back cast. Keep the line up high. Make sure your trajectory is straight. Drop the fly gently onto the water.” Together, we used to practice fly fishing on the front lawn. I'd make a cast and try to land the fly in the middle of a round, metal pie plate – in the center like a bullseye. If it hit, it would fall with a soft 'plunk' and Dad would make a fuss. If I missed it and my fly landed on the grass instead, he'd say, “Try again Jacob. Try until you land it every time.”

Peripherally, I caught a glimpse of a few Great Northern loons huddled together not far from the shoreline. What were they doing there? Loons usually travel alone, but here were five of them in a cluster. Maybe it was a family? One loon, wailing and making yodelling sounds swam away from the group, toward me.

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My Dad had been a fish and wildlife officer. He travelled all over the Province of Alberta,

working away from home for days on end...especially in the spring and fall. When he returned, we sat on the couch together and he regaled me with stories of life on the road. My Dad loved his job, especially the part where he protected nature from humans.

“Isaiah! Come here!”

“Now who's shouting?”

“Just get over here, now!”

Isaiah laid his fly rod down on the dirty sand. He dragged his feet moving toward me at a snail's pace.

“What are you doing? Get over here now!”

He sauntered a tiny bit faster.

“C'mere. Take a look at that loon. It's swimming *towards* us, not away from us. It keeps getting closer and closer.”

“It's only a decoy,” said Isaiah “A remote-controlled one.”

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Just then, the loon let loose with a crazy, laughing sound.

“It's not a decoy! It's trying to get our attention.”

The loon halted in the shallow water near shore, not ten feet away from us. It was so close we could see its beady red eyes. (Dad told me that loons only have red eyes in the summer. It helped them to see and to fish in the cobalt blue and emerald green waters.) Oddly, the birds' wings were held tight against its speckled black and white body. The teal ring around its neck matched the cool gem colour of the lake.

“Look at that beak!” said Isaiah “It could easily stab us to death with that thing! It could shred our faces! Pluck out our eyes!”

Wading into the water, getting closer to the loon we both saw thin wire wrapped around its neck. Fishing line maybe? Was there a hook on the line too? Was it asking us for help?

Reaching down, I touched its head. My heart was racing like an F1 car on an Alabama speedway. I could see there was a shiny red hook embedded in the bird's body and fishing line was wrapped tightly around its neck. Left like this, it couldn't fly or fish or survive. It *was* asking us to help!

“Grab the scissors from the tackle box.”

Isaiah ran, splashing his way to shore. There was a tiny pair of scissors in the box we used for

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snipping off the end of fishing line.

“Should I pick it up?” I asked.

“Ah yeah! Of course!” said Isaiah, instinctively backing away from the entangled loon. “How else are we going to help it?”

“Okay, c'mon. I'll pick it up, you cut away the line.”

Taking a deep, ragged breath, I closed my eyes for only a second. I felt my Dad's presence standing shoulder to shoulder with me in the shallow waters of Police Outpost Lake.

“Jacob, the bird won't hurt you. It needs your help. Know that I am here and I will guide you through this.”

My hands were shaking but I bent down to pick up the loon. Holding it gingerly under its wings, I held it out at arm's length, truly afraid it may stab me with its beak. But the loon was silent and still.

“Hurry. Cut the line!” I said.

Isaiah shuffled closer. Using the scissors, he cut away the fishing line from around the loon's neck.

“Now take out that hook, Isaiah. Hurry! I can't hold this thing forever you know.”

Still, the loon was silent.

Isaiah pulled hard on the fishing hook, as if it was a safety pin. The bird shifted in my hands, seemingly trying to pull itself free from my grasp.

“No! Not that way! You're hurting it. Wriggle the hook back and forth, back and forth, nice and gentle.”

“Alright! I will. Stop yelling at me.”

Isaiah bit on his lower lip. One hand on the loon's body, one hand on the hook. Slowly, back and forth, his slim fingers worked to loosen the hook from the bird's flesh. The hook was caught deep beneath one of its wings. Using the calloused part of his finger tip, he pushed down the sharp tip of the hook, tugging it this way and that way until finally, he set the loon free.

I patted its head; a gesture of gratitude that it didn't use its beak as a weapon. Putting it down onto the water, it flapped its wings with a joyful flourish. The loon turned, training its red eyes directly on us. It gathered its body, rose up in the water, and slapped down its wings hard on the surface of the lake. It seemed to say, “Thank you boys. You saved me. I won't soon forget.”

“How did we do that?” Isaiah exclaimed. “I can't believe it! I'm still shaking.”

Back on shore, Uncle Rick had been watching.

“Boys, I'm awfully proud of you both. That was spectacular. You worked together, helped each other out and kept that loon alive.”

“Yeah, we did Uncle Rick. But, I couldn't have done it without my Dad.”

P.S. - This story was inspired by true events.

