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## *Staring in Disbelief*

To bring in some extra money, Mr. Bender trapped muskrats along the marshy shores of Lake Erie. If invited, Betty and I went with him to watch as he checked his traps. We either followed a few steps behind him or kept at a much safer distance, depending on his mood that day. We enjoyed these little adventures, running down the steep cliff to the water's edge, gathering stones and shells, or removing our running shoes and squealing as the frigid waters lapped the shoreline and chilled our naked toes.

Mr. Bender was happy and considered it a good day if he was able to bag "three big ones," as he referred to the muskrats. After removing the dead animals from the powerful teeth of the steel traps, he would stuff their limp bodies into a brown burlap bag and reset his traps for the next day. Tossing the heavy bag over his shoulder, he would head home to skin them on the back porch. When we arrived back at the house, Betty and I would dart off to play.

After he'd removed the skins from the animals, he would put them fur-side-down over a wooden, A-shaped board

and then hang them on the backyard clothesline to dry and cure in the sun. When the pelts were cured, he would sell them locally for the best price he could get and keep the meat for meals. The meat was dark, tender, and stringy, with a slightly sweet taste. Betty and I didn't like it but managed to choke it down.

It was after one of these muskrat adventures when I was pushing Betty in the tire swing that I brought her to an abrupt stop. I had an idea to share with her. "Hey, let's go watch him skin the muskrats. It should be fun!" I said excitedly, as I steadied the tire for her.

"Do you think we should?" she asked, sounding fearful and reluctant.

"Well, he'll chase us away if he doesn't want us around. We'll have to be as quiet as mice, though."

She jumped quickly out of the tire, and we tiptoed silently around the house to the back porch where we spotted Mr. Bender kneeling down, intent upon preparing the muskrats for skinning. As he sharpened his long steel knife back and forth across the whetstone, we quietly took a position at the far end of the porch about six feet away from him. He gave us a quick don't-piss-me-off look and went back to his work.

Betty fidgeted and shuffled from one foot to the other. She was always a bit high-strung, and I had difficulty keeping her still so she wouldn't anger Mr. Bender. I took hold of her arm and whispered firmly, "Shuuush. Don't get too close, and be still." I tightened my hold on her arm to let her know I was serious. We had only been with this family for a few months and had not quite warmed to them. And Mr. Bender had already nicknamed Betty "Ditty" because, as he said, "She's always prancing around like some damn nervous cat."

We watched wide-eyed as Mr. Bender maneuvered the first big rat into the right position for skinning. I felt Betty's body tighten as he positioned the knife to make the first stab,

but she remained still and silent. Soon, with one quick thrust of the razor-sharp knife, he split the rat's belly from throat to tail, and the bloody guts came spilling out.

Betty could contain herself no longer. "Oh, yuck!" she shrieked, immediately clamping her hand over her mouth to silence herself. But that was all it took to set Mr. Bender off. Quick as a flash he grabbed a handful of the disgusting guts and hurled them into her face.

"Oh no!" I cried out as my hands flew up to cover my mouth in utter disbelief of what I'd seen. *What a mean and disgusting thing to do*, I thought. Stunned, I watched as the sickening mess splattered on her face and tumbled down the front of her dress.

Her body jerked and stiffened, seeming not to know what had hit her.

"Now get the hell out of here!" he barked.

"Come on, Betty," I said as I yanked her away, trying at the same time to brush the stringy guts off her and keep myself from throwing up. I pulled her, crying and gagging, over to the rusty old pump at the far side of the house. Grabbing the tin cup off its hook, I quickly scooped water from the priming bucket to prime the pump. I was relieved that it took only one prime. As the first gush of water came out, I scooped it up in my hands. "Here, bend over."

I gently splashed the water over her face, cleaned her up as much as possible, and got her calmed down a bit. "You shouldn't have done that," I scolded. "You know how mean he can be."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it," she apologized.

"That's okay. I'm sorry I even suggested going to watch him skin the stupid rats. Let's go and play way back in the orchard, far away from him."

"I don't think I can ever get far enough away from him," she sniffled. "Why does he have to be so nasty, anyway?"

Once Mr. Bender was out of sight, we turned and thumbed our noses in his direction before running off to the safety of the orchard. We were still so angry with him. "We'll have to be more careful around him, and we *certainly* won't go and watch him skin those stupid rats again!"