

Herrings for Dinner (creative non-fiction – written in 2010)

~ Wedgeport 1940s setting ~

Bill Boudreau

“Billy,” his mother said, “Go to Doucette’s Wharf and ask one of the fishermen for three or four herrings for dinner. It’s nine o’clock and the boats must be unloading.”

“Mom, I don’t want to go.”

“Why?”

“Men make fun at little boys. They don’t listen to me when I say something. The other day at the store ...”

“You’re taking it too seriously. You just turn eight. You’re growing.”

“Wake up John and ask him to go. He’s older.”

“John came in late last night. He needs his sleep.”

“Why does he always get his way?”

“Ah, you’re imagining that. Go get fish, before your father comes home. Go! Go!”

“Who should I ask?”

“Anyone! Emanuel, Reggie, Wallice, anyone. Go!”

Billy left the house. The walk to Doucette’s Wharf was close to three miles. A sunny June Saturday, the fog had lifted early. Hands in overall pockets, he turned the corner and headed south on the dirt packed main village road. Passing the Co-op store, he looked at it. *Are there herrings at the Co-op.*

On a bicycle, Rudy approached from behind, interrupting Billy’s musing. “Hello Billy.” Slowing down, he said, “Where’re you going?”

Rudy was a man who had never owned a car or truck. He lived alone in a small house.

“To Doucette’s Wharf—get herrings for dinner.”

“That’s where I’m going, too.”

“Are you getting herrings?”

“Yep. The fishermen should be in by now. Well, I may see you there?” He pedaled his bicycle faster, moved ahead.

Rudy rode his bicycle around the village a lot. He would often talk to Billy and other boys his age. On the other side of the road, he saw old man Felix, cane in hand, limping from his house toward the barn.

“Hello, Felix!” The old man did not answer. *Maybe he’s too deaf or doesn’t want to talk to me.*

James’s Taxi drove by, going north. Billy turned around, strolling backward and watched the Chevrolet disappear past the church. He continued back strolling and then saw a blue Dodge coming his way. He knew who it was. He stopped and fixed his eyes on the automobile. As it approached, the driver’s face became clear. The priest’s stern face stayed focused ahead. As he drove by, he didn’t turn to look at Billy. Billy bowed, then turned around and moved on. He had not expected to be acknowledged, anyway, but he knew the priest would have noticed if Billy hadn’t nodded. Father Doucette would

remind the people at next Sunday's sermon that not to bow to the village's top religious figure was disrespectful.

Billy then heard the church bell toll. Someone in the village had died. Most likely an old person and Father Doucette was on his way to send the soul to heaven. That's what the nuns had told Billy at school what happened when someone died.

Hands in his pockets, he strode on, looking at the bay to his right and down beyond the houses and fields. The sea divided the village and Comeau's Hill, a small hamlet across the bay, up and beyond the Grand *Bois* and low scrubs. Among the treetops, the sun reflected off Comeau's Hill's church steeple.

The tide was up and covered the marshes. The ocean smell filled the air. He liked the fresh sea breeze.

He picked up a rock and threw it at crows feasting on cow droppings in the pasture across the road. The birds flew away.

Ahead, he saw Alfred steering his ox pulling a cart from the barn path, behind his house. He was going south. *I'm going to ask him for a ride.* Billy ran and caught up. "I'm going to Doucette's Wharf. Will you give me a ride?"

Alfred did not look or answered Billy.

"Do you want to give me a ride?" Billy said, again, louder.

Without turning his head, Alfred replied, "Hop in!" He guided the ox with his whip to the right side of the road, but didn't stop for Billy to get in. Billy grabbed the back edge of the cart, and in three attempts, he was onboard. The cart had dry cow manure remnants. It did not smell. He found a spot and sat on the rail.

Alfred walked to the left of the ox's head. "Why are you going to Doucette's Wharf?" not looking at Billy.

"Get herrings for dinner."

"Too bad, I thought you could help me load fresh cow shit from the back of Edward's barn for my potato garden."

Billy didn't answer. *I don't want to pitch cow shit.*

"Has your father fertilized his garden yet?"

"He talked about it last night at supper."

"Who's he going to get to do it?"

"Uncle William. He's got an ox."

"Tell him I'd do it."

"I will."

Alfred gave the beast-of-burden two lashes of the whip on the rump. The ox picked up pace.

In front of Epstien's small store, Alfred placed the whip's leather strip on the ox's nose and said, "Whoa."

Georgina stood behind the store's screen door looking out. She moved away, and Alfred went in. In a few minutes, he returned rolling a cigarette, then lit it.

Alfred commanded, "Go! Go!" the animal stepped forward as if it knew where it was going.

"Does your ox understand your words?"

"Of course! he knows exactly what I tell him."

"Who taught him to understand people words?"

"I did."

“How many words does he know?”

“Enough to do the work I need from him.”

On the other side of the road, Edwina, holding a basket, was going by in the opposite direction.

“Do you think the blueberries are ripe enough to pick?” Alfred said.

“Charlie told me he saw a good patch in his field, close to the water’s edge. He said I could pick ’em.”

“It’s still early morning. The bushes are wet.”

Edwina now behind them, tossed her words over her shoulder without breaking stride. “It should be dry by the time I get there. Anyway, I have my rubber boots.”

“I’ll be turning to Edward’s barn soon,” Alfred told Billy.

Billy could see Edward’s yellow two-story house just ahead.

“You won’t have far to get to the wharf.”

“I’ll run the rest of the way. I want to be home with the herrings in time for my mother to cook it for dinner.”

“Haw!” Alfred said, poking the nose of the ox with his whip. The animal turned right on the path toward Edward’s house.

Billy jumped out and ran to the corner of the road that sloped downward leading to the wharf, water’s edge, and onto the pier.

He went by Andrew’s boat shop. Through the huge door, he saw a boat almost completed.

Just before the wharf, the fish factory buzzed with people processing herrings. Billy went to the opened door and looked inside. No one noticed him.

Edging a long rectangular table, a bin in the center, seven or eight women filleted herrings. A slide through an opening in the roof kept the bins full. With the finesse of a fencer, in three knife stocks, each woman cleaned a herring faster than the eye could see. They chattered as they threw the gutted herrings into a tub at their sides. In the background, the conveyor grunted and emitted mechanical clangs and thumps. The fuel-powered mechanics brought barrels of fresh herrings from the boats to the factory, keeping the factory bins replenished.

“This is your second tub, this morning,” Emillion, the supervisor, said as he pulled a full tub of fillets from Irene’s side. He pulled an empty one in its place. Emillion punched a card tied to Irene’s rubber apron.

To the right of the wharf, several fishermen worked inside their shored boats.

Billy proceeded to the end of the dock where the fishermen were unloading. He saw Emanuel’s rig. The boat’s hull glittered with herrings. With a shallow netted scoop, Wallace, Emanuel’s brother, shoveled the fish into a barrel attached to the conveyor chain that hoisted the loaded barrels to the factory. Wallace stood knee deep in herrings. Paul’s boat waiting to unload next was loosely tied to Emanuel’s.

Billy hollered, “Wallace! can I have four herrings?”

“How many barrels do you think you have this morning?” Paul asked Wallace.

“I don’t know? Close to twenty-five.”

Wallace didn’t say anything or looked at Billy. *Did he hear me? Maybe he didn’t.*

“Wallace! can I have four herrings for dinner?” Billy shouted.

Wallace looked up. “Sure.” He threw four hefty herrings on the wharf. “Here’s an extra one.”

Billy put the five herrings together in a pile. He went to the far tip of the dock, where Joe sat on the edge, hand fishing. “Do you have a piece of string to tie my herrings? I have to carry them home?”

“Yea,” he said without turning to Billy. “Look in my tackle box.”

Billy threaded the string through the herrings’ gills and tied a loop. He overheard Paul ask Wallace and Emanuel if they’d seen the big thing in the ocean that morning. Billy stopped and listened.

Just at that moment, Wallace, with a scoop full of herring, slipped on the slime and fell over the boat’s edge in the water, holding on between the two boats. From where Billy stood, he saw the rope that tied Emanuel’s boat. The rigs were coming together with Wallace in the water between them. Billy dropped the herrings, grabbed the rope, pulled it tight, and made several turns on the dock’s bollard. Emmanuel’s boat stopped drifting toward Paul’s boat that would have crushed Wallace. Emmanuel quickly helped Wallace climbed out of the water.

Paul, Emmanuel, and Wallace stared up at Billy.

“Great thing you did, Billy,” Wallace said. “Thank you.”

“Yea. Quick thinking,” Emmanuel added. “You know, you probably saved Wallace’s life.”

Billy felt good. He’d done something that grownups noticed.

Walking away, he thought of the big thing they had seen in the ocean—maybe a dinosaur that lived deep in the sea. Perhaps it would come on land. Billy was not afraid—he was brave. He wanted to hurry home and tell his mother about the sea monster. He wanted to tell his chum, Joseph, too.

The strung herrings’ tails dragged on the ground.

As he walked by the open factory door, Geraldine called, “You did a wonderful thing over there.”

“How do you know?”

“Words get around fast here.

“What have you got there, Billy?” Irene asked.

“Wallace gave me some herrings for dinner.” *Everybody is talking to me.*

“Billy, do you want a ride home?” He turned and saw Wallace in his pick-up truck. Emanuel was in the passenger’s seat. “Yes!” Billy jumped in the back.

Wallace and Emanuel lived just a few houses from Billy’s.

He walked into his house at eleven twenty-five.

“It’s about time you got back. Your father will be here soon, and he’ll want dinner ready. Why did it take you so long?”

“I did it as fast as I could. I got a ride with Alfred and his ox.”

“I think you could’ve walked faster than the ox. How many herrings did you get?”

“Five.”

“Clean them. Get the cutting board from the cellar.”

John came down from upstairs. He’d been in bed all morning.

“I want something to eat. Where’s the food?” John said.

“Just a minute and I’ll have something ready,” Billy’s mother said. While going to the pantry, she told Billy, “Go to the back of the house and clean the herrings while I give John something to eat. Take this knife. It’s sharp. Don’t throw away the roe. Here’s a pan with water to rinse the gutted fish.”

*If I could fillet herrings as the women at the factory, I could've this done in a jiffy.*

He grabbed the biggest one and laid it on the board, lengthwise. He cut the head and pulled it from the body. *I wonder if fish have feelings like us.* Guts attached to the neck bone, he inserted the knife in the opening and slit the herring's belly. The remaining internal organs came out. He detached them from the spine. The slim didn't bother him. He pulled out the intestines from the stomach. Then he cut off the fins and tail.

Only one herring had roe.

His father drove in the driveway, in front of the barn.

In the house, Billy gave the herrings to his mother.

"They'll be done by the time your father is ready to eat—go outside and get rid of the fish heads and guts. Throw them in the field, back of the outhouse," she said.

Stepping away from where he'd thrown the guts, he heard crows caw. Two were already pecking the remains.

In the house, his father was washing himself for dinner.

Billy's mother said, "Wash after your father, then come eat."

They sat at the table, except for John. He was already gone.

"Billy, I heard at the gas station that you saved Wallace's life or saved him from grave injury."

"Yes, I tied the boat in time as it was drifting toward Paul's."

"That was smart. You had good sense. You took action."

"Billy, that's great!" his mother said.

"Where's John?" Billy's father asked.

"Gone to work at Fred's," she said.

"I wanted him to help me weed the vegetables this afternoon."

"He wants to earn money," Billy's mother answered after she had sat at the table.

They ate the fresh herrings with homegrown potatoes and vegetables.

"Well, you're going to have to help me, Billy."

"I want to go play with Joseph." *When I get bigger, I'm going to go away from here. Then, I'll do what I want.*