

Guys Day Out

by Ellen Klages

Andrew Clemens had always wanted a son.

A boy to take fishing, share ice cream right out of the carton, play baseball on a Saturday afternoon.

He got Tommy.

Tommy had a sweet smile, spatulate fingers, soft-focus eyes.

"Mongoloid," the doctor said. "Sorry, Andy. But he's mentally retarded. He may never get beyond simple tasks like dressing himself."

Andrew was silent for a minute. "When can I see him?"

"It's not a good idea." The doctor shook his head. "He should be in an institution, and you don't want get attached. They're fine places, really. It's 1960, not the dark ages. But it'll be easier on Helen if she doesn't know, if you sign the papers before she comes out of the anesthetic." He patted Andrew on the shoulder. "Give her a few weeks, let her rest, then try again. It's for the best."

"I want to see my son," Andrew said. "I'll take my family home."

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"Are you sure he can handle this?" Helen asked.

"C'mon. He's ten. It's Guys Day Out. He's been excited about it all week. I'm not going to try to teach him to cast or anything. I got him a bamboo pole and a carton of worms."

"What about the hook? He could—"

"Sweetie, he'll be fine." Andrew kissed his wife on the cheek. "I'll put the worm on the hook for him, I'll make sure he keeps his life jacket on the whole time. He's going to have a ball."

"I don't want a ball. I want to see *fish*." Tommy trudged down the stairs in a striped T-shirt and jeans, his wide moon face in a determined grin under his Detroit Tigers baseball cap. A Boy Scout knapsack, insignia faded, weighed down his left shoulder; his soft, stocky body canted in compensation.

"Hey, Buddy," said Andrew. He reached up and swung the boy off the last two steps. "We're going to see fish, all right. You about ready to go?"

Tommy nodded several times. "I packed my backsack with *everything*." He bent over and lifted the flap. "I have my toothbrush and a dime and my lib'ary book and three pens and two green socks." He looked at his mother. "My feet could get wet. I don't like that."

"That's very good planning," she said.

"I know. And I have my radio and some Lifesavers and a banana in case of Amy or David get hungry."

Andrew laughed. "And here I thought it was just going to be the two of us. Are all twenty-six of your invisible friends coming along?"

"Daddy." Tommy put his hands on his hips and rolled his eyes. "They won't *all* fit in there. Just Amy, Cathy, David, Edie, and Frank." He thought for a minute. "And Xner, Yackie, and Zelda, because sometimes they don't get a turn. They're at the end. Brian can *not* come. He was bad again, so he is locked in his room all day with no food."

"Pretty stiff punishment."

"He was *bad*." Tommy pushed the flap of the knapsack closed. "Can we go now?"

"As soon as we get our lunch out of the icebox, we're on the road."

"I get baloney with mustard and no—pickles." He stuck out his tongue.

"Absolutely. And Fritos and Hostess cupcakes," his mother said. "Coca-Cola in the green bottles. I know what my fellas like." She lifted up the bill of his cap and kissed his dark hair. "Have a great time, little man. I'll miss you."

"I'm going to see fish." Tommy tugged his cap back into place and picked up his knapsack, slinging it almost over his shoulder. He headed for the garage.

The man at the dock took Andrew's deposit and winched a battered green rowboat down onto the concrete ramp that slanted into the lake.

"I close at six thirty," he said. "It's shallow past the island, on accounta the drought, so don't get stuck."

"I think we can handle that," Andrew said. He put his tackle box, rods, and the plaid thermos cooler into the boat and reached back a hand for Tommy.

"I never rented to one of them before. You ain't gonna let *him* row, are ya?"

"No. I'm not." Andrew bit his lip against saying anything more and lifted his son into the boat. He tugged on the straps of the orange life jacket, pulling them snug, and rested his knuckles, just for a moment, on the pale, smooth skin of the boy's cheek. "Good to go, Buddy?"

Tommy gave him a thumbs-up and grinned. "Let's go see fish."

Andrew pushed off with one oar and sat down, his back to the boat man. He began to row, the rounded haft of the wood rough against his hands until he found his rhythm.

The lake was wide and glass-smooth, the sun glinting on the ripples from the oars. The hum of a distant outboard motor echoed off the trees. Tommy sat with his arms tight at his sides for ten minutes before stretching a tentative hand over the gunwale and letting his fingertips drag through the brown-green water.

"It's cold! I got goose bumps."

"Yep."

"Do fish get goose bumps?"

"I don't think so. Fish are pretty well adapted to living down there."

"That's good," said Tommy. "If they get too cold they swim upside down like the goldfish that died in my class."

Andrew rowed for half an hour until they came to a bank overhung by the roots of a dying oak tree, cicadas buzzing high in the branches. He angled the boat toward the shore. "Let's see how they're biting, okay?"

Tommy jerked his hand out of the water and cradled it in his lap. "I don't want them to bite me."

"No, no, no. Sorry. They don't bite people. Only bugs. That's what they eat."

"I eat bologna." Tommy peered into the water but kept his hands in his lap.

Andrew tied a round red-striped bobber onto the line of the bamboo pole, about three feet above the hook. He opened the white cardboard tub of worms, digging through the moss for a thick red tail.

"Eeeuuuw," said Tommy. "Slimy worms."

"Yeah, but fish eat 'em up like candy." Andrew twisted the worm into a loose knot and reached for the hook.

"Worm candy. Ick. Ick. Ick." Tommy scrunched his entire face into a grimace of disgust. "I don't want it." He backed away, huddled against the far side of the boat. "I don't want it, Daddy."

"Okay. You don't have to touch it. See?" Andrew dropped the worm back into the carton with a sigh. "You can watch while I set up my gear." He slid his fiberglass rod from its case and snapped the reel onto the shaft, threading a length of monofilament through the guides. He selected a fly from his tackle box and tied it to the loose end.

"That is not a worm," Tommy said. He scooted closer, his face curious.

"Nope. It's a trout fly. A Royal Coachman. I tied it myself, last weekend."

"People can not make flies."

"You are correct, sir. Not real flies. I make these to fool the fish into *thinking* it's a fly, so they'll try to bite it."

"Can I have one? Instead of a *worm*?"

"Let me see what else I've got." Andrew inventoried his wet flies. "Ah, here we go. Dragonfly. You'll like this one." He held out his palm and showed Tommy an inch-long creation of green and blue feathers wrapped tightly with teal silk floss.

"It looks like a fairy," Tommy said, his eyes wide. "Maybe I can fool *them* and catch a real one." His face creased into a wide grin.

Andrew started to shake his head, stopped. "You can try," he smiled. He clipped off the barb of the hook and attached a teardrop-shaped lead sinker to the shaft, tying it a few feet below the bobber. He put the butt of the pole into Tommy's hands.

"Now what?" Tommy grasped the bamboo with a white-knuckle grip.

"Now I throw the bobber into the water." He tossed the plastic sphere with an overhand flick. "Watch. The dragonfl—the fairy—will sink down, but the bobber floats on top."

"I can't see anything. The water is too shiny."

"I forgot." Andrew pulled a pair of sunglasses from the top pocket of his fishing vest. "Polarized, just like mine." He pointed to the green lenses clipped to the frames of his wire-rims. "They let you see what's under the surface."

"They're magic glasses?" Tommy asked, putting his on. They slid down a bit on his small, flat nose.

Andrew thought for a minute before he nodded. "Pretty much." Easier than trying to explain the components of reflected light. He pulled the line up until the dragonfly cleared the water, then let it drop again. The fly was a pale gleam as it sank.

"I can see the fairy swimming!" Tommy shouted. He watched with open-mouthed fascination.

Andrew smiled and picked up his rod. He cast, whipping the line back and forth until the Royal Coachman sailed through the air and touched the water, thirty feet away, with barely a ripple.

He glanced at Tommy between casts. The boy sat unmoving, unwavering, fierce attention focused on the plastic bobber as it drifted gently.

"I need to put down my fishing pole," he said after fifteen minutes.

"Sure. There's a tube on the side of the boat to hold it. You need to stretch, huh?"

"No. Yackie and Zelda want to slide down the string, and I have to have both my hands to get them."

"I didn't know they could swim," Andrew said.

"They can do anything they want because they're b'visible." Tommy set the pole and reached into his knapsack, cupping both hands around a secret cargo, fragile and precious.

"But you can see them."

"Yeah. I'm special. Like special ed, you know." Tommy leaned over the side of the boat and submerged both hands next to the bobber. He released his invisible friends and stared into the water for a full minute before straightening up.

"They got down okay. When they are done, I'll pull them up and give them some banana."

"Done with what? What are they going to do down there?"

"Talk to the fairies."

"Oh. What will they talk about?" Andrew made a long, lazy cast. The fly began to drift back as soon as it touched the water.

"Mommy says that fairies make up dreams for me," Tommy said. "Zelda wants some too."

"Fair enough." Andrew pulled his line in. "Speaking of bananas, I'm about ready for a snack. What about you?"

"I have a light snack at four o'clock."

"Right. Then how about lunch now?"

"Lunch is at twelve noon."

Andrew looked at his watch. "It's eleven thirty, but it's Guys Day Out. No rules. We can eat anytime we want."

"Lunch is at twelve *noon*," Tommy said.

Andrew sighed.

They ate half an hour later.

When Tommy had finished the last of his cupcake, Andrew wiped the ear-to-ear chocolate smears with a damp paper towel. "It's getting hot," he said. "Pull your line up and we'll head down to the other end, see if we can find a shadier spot for the rest of the afternoon."

"Yackie and Zelda are not back yet."

"Well, tell them the boat is leaving in five minutes."

"Daddy, they're not done with—"

"Five minutes, Thomas."

"But the fairies haven't . . .," Tommy mumbled, his face closing into a pout. He turned away, and Andrew didn't catch the rest. He glanced at his watch. Four and a half minutes later he heard a deep sigh. The boy reached over the side and rapped his knuckles on the bobber, jiggling it. He cupped his hands below the surface, as if waiting for underwater communion, then brought them up, thumbs tight together. He

breathed gently into the hollow.

"They are dry now. Can you open my backpack for me?"

Andrew reached across and lifted the khaki canvas flap. "There you go."

Tommy let his invisible passengers tumble from his hands onto the yellow curve of the banana, then wiped his palms on the legs of his jeans. "I didn't catch a fairy."

"Not this time. The fish weren't biting either. Maybe we'll have better luck at the next spot."

Andrew stowed their gear along the side of the rowboat and unshipped the oars. The lake smelled of damp earth and green plants. They stopped again half a mile down the shore, tying the boat up in a shaded inlet, and pulled sweat-beaded Cokes from the melting ice in the bottom of the cooler. Tommy sank the dragonfly again, and watched the bobber intently until his four o'clock snack. Then he yawned and folded into a fetal curl in the bottom of the boat, his head pillowed on his knapsack, his eyelids drooping into sleep.

Andrew tilted the Tigers cap over the boy's nose, already pink from the sun, covered him with a rain poncho, and stepped out onto the riverbank.

A deep, shadowed pool a few yards away looked promising. He threaded a Green Caddis Fly onto his line and fished for two hours, catching a rainbow trout and two small striped bass on barbless hooks. He released each back into the shallows.

When the sun dipped below the trees, casting long shadows across the water, he climbed back into the boat without waking the boy and rowed silently through the growing dusk. The surface dimpled as fish began to feed on the evening hatch, clouds of tiny insects just visible in the fading light. In the fringes of tall weeds and grasses along the bank, the first fireflies rose, twinkling yellow-green.

Tommy turned over and muttered, half-awake.

"Hey, get up, Buddy. You ought to see this."

"Wha—?" Tommy sat up and pushed his baseball cap off his head, wiping the sleep from the corners of his eyes. He looked around for a moment, his face puckered in confusion, then saw his father and smiled.

"Look over there." Andrew pointed to the flickering lights on the bank. "Lightning bugs."

"Fairies," Tommy said in a matter-of-fact tone. "They have to fly my dreams home before I can go to sleep." He climbed into Andrew's lap and snuggled under his arm.

"I had fun. Even if I didn't catch one."

Andrew kissed the top of Tommy's head and rowed back to the dock in awkward joy.

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They fished every summer. Helen came along a few times, swaddled in long sleeves and sun hat, but mostly it was Guys Day Out. Winter evenings, in his den, Andrew laid out feathers, fur, and gossamer thread and hand-tied artificial creatures—Leadwings and Caddis for trout, elaborate dragonfly variations for Tommy's fairies.

Tommy's voice cracked and deepened; he began to shave. For six months he struggled, stubble patching his cheeks where he had missed spots, or just forgot. Easier to leave it be. Andrew let his own beard grow, like father, like son, and was startled in the mirror by more salt than pepper.

At twenty-two, Tommy graduated from the County Training Center. In the photo on Andrew's desk, Thomas Matthew Clemens is a soft, beaming fireplug of a man with bashful oriental eyes. His arm is draped across the wheelchair of his best friend, Patrick, whose head lolls to one side, his twisted body held upright by a nylon strap in blue and gold—the school colors.

The county found him a job in a restaurant, washing endless tablecloths and napkins in an industrial machine, for minimum wage. After eighteen months, the restaurant went broke. Tommy went home and watched cartoons and *Gilligan's Island* until his caseworker assigned him to another job, and then a third.

The year Helen got sick, he went to work at the McDonald's on Archer Avenue, twenty minutes on the bus. His red nametag said TOM in white letters, his grown-up name. He smiled at every customer, filled the ketchup-packet bin, and wiped tables with green disinfectant that smelled like the hospital he was afraid to visit again.

"Just us now, Buddy," Andrew said after the funeral.

Tommy nodded. "Guys Day Out, every day."

But it wasn't. Every day wasn't fishing. It was waiting for the number 20 bus at 8:53 in his red-and-yellow uniform, home on the number 16, in time for *Scooby Doo*. Every day flowed into every other, until he had been at McDonald's fifteen years, awarded a golden arches to pin beneath his TOM.

Tommy left work one Thursday afternoon and walked to the bus stop. He sat in the shelter, his bus pass in his pocket—Handicapped Adult, Reduced Fare—waiting for the number 16 to come. Number 34. Number 44. No 16. He zipped his windbreaker to his chin when the rain began, and got on the next bus, his white sneakers wet and squeaking on the rubber mats. He rode to the end of the line without seeing his stop, so he rode back again. Nothing looked familiar.

"You gonna get off or what, buddy?" the bus driver growled.

"Only Daddy calls me Buddy," Tommy said.

"Nut case." The driver used his walkie-talkie to call in. The policeman met them at the last stop. He took one look and his face softened. "What's your name, son?"

"Tommy. Tom. Tom Clemens."

"Do you know your phone number, Tom? Is there someone we can call?"

He nodded. "My dad is at my house. It's two-six-nine—" Tommy's face wrinkled in thought. "Two-six-nine—" He closed his eyes. "Two-six-nine—" But he couldn't remember the rest.

"Can't be too many Clemenses at that prefix," the policeman said. "Dispatch can find it." He talked into the radio on his shoulder. Andrew arrived twenty minutes later and took Tommy home.

The next Tuesday, at work, Tommy put mustards in the ketchup bin and went on his lunch break half an hour after he clocked in. Mr. Barnett, his manager, sat him down to have a little chat.

"This isn't like you, Tom. You're one of my most dependable guys. But you're not paying attention. Are you getting enough sleep?"

"I go to bed at ten thirty," Tommy said. "Eleven, if it is Saturday."

"Well, be more careful from now on, okay?"

"Okey-dokey." Tommy gave him a thumbs-up and watched very carefully that afternoon when he mopped the entrance floor and filled the napkin dispensers.

A week later, Marcus, the black teenager who worked the drive-up window, bumped into him accidentally. Tommy dropped his Big Mac; lettuce and secret sauce splashed across the floor.

"Fuck you, you fucking fucker," he shouted. He hurled a stack of supersize drink cups at Marcus. They flew onto the warming racks and splattered into the deep fryer.

Everyone at the counter stopped and stared. Tommy stood motionless, his arms rigid at his sides, his mouth open and slack, eyes vacant.

The ringing phone woke Andrew from an afternoon nap. "We've got a problem," Mr. Barnett said. "You'll have to come get Tom."

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"Alzheimer's," said Tom's doctor. "I'm sorry, Mr. Clemens. I could run some tests for you, but the symptoms are all there." He ticked them off on his fingers. "Memory loss, confusion, violent outbursts. What we used to call senile dementia."

"I'm seventy-six," Andrew said. "I should worry. But he's only forty-three."

The doctor nodded. "It's unfair. But I'm afraid every Down syndrome adult over forty experiences this sort of premature aging."

Andrew looked at his hands for a long time before he spoke. "So what are the treatment options?"

"There really aren't any. Tom may have four or five years left, but he'll continue to lose function. I can make some calls if you want—facilities with units for the memory-impaired. They're good places. He'll be comfortable."

"No," said Andrew. "I'll take care of my boy. I always have."

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"Dinner's ready, Buddy," Andrew stood in the doorway of the living room. "Meatloaf and your favorite—smashed potatoes."

Tommy sat on the rug, watching *Finding Nemo* for the third time in two days, a thin line of drool silver in the lamplight, a dark stain spreading down the leg of his Dockers.

"Tom? Do you need to take a whizz?"

Tommy looked down at himself. "No. I already did." He turned back to the cartoon.

His father took his hand and led him upstairs. Sponged him off, changed his clothes. After dinner, he drove to the drugstore for a carton of Depends, size extra-large.

Andrew diapered his bearded boy for a week, his tears soaking into the absorbent layers. Tommy lay placid on the bed, 170 pounds of toddler, humming tunelessly to himself.

"Okay, good to go," Andrew said that Friday night. Tommy pulled up his elastic pants and shambled downstairs. A few minutes later the theme song from *The Brady Bunch* blared from the TV. Andrew went to his den and tied half a dozen dragonflies, surprised he still remembered how. Blue feathers, lead shot, gossamer wings, teal silk thread.

"Hey Buddy," he said, walking into the living room. "Tomorrow's Saturday. Let's go look at fish."

He called the marina at the lake, reserved a dingy with an outboard motor. Just half a day. He made Tommy's favorite lunch—bologna sandwiches, Fritos, cupcakes with fudge-dark icing—and put them in a white foam cooler with a six-pack of Bud Lite.

Mid-afternoon, a blond-haired college boy, State U. sweatshirt cut ragged at the shoulders, drove a trailer down the concrete ramp and slid the boat into the lake.

"There you go, Gramps," he said, handing Andrew the outboard key. "We close at six thirty."

Andrew sat in the stern, hand on the throttle, watching Tommy trail his fingers through the water and eat Fritos from the bag with his other hand. Summer houses crowded the lakeshore now, and it took forty-five minutes before Andrew found an unpopulated inlet.

He anchored the boat and assembled his rod, tied a Royal Coachman on his line. He cast into the shallows for an hour, catching nothing. Tommy sat on the bank, legs sprawled, his back against a willow. He ate three sandwiches, mustard smearing yellow-bright against his beard.

"Uh-oh," he said.

"What?"

"Brian was bad again," Tommy said. "Brian wet himself."

"I'll be right there."

Andrew's eyes blurred with tears. He took two Bud Lites from the cooler, pulling the pop-tops back. Beer, because Tommy liked the way the bubbles tickled, liked to

drink what TV men did. Beer because it would mask the taste of the tablets Andrew dropped in, one by one, all twenty-six.

"Drink up, Buddy," he said, climbing slowly up onto the bank. He handed Tom a can.

In the tall grass around them, fireflies began to rise in the twilight, twinkling yellow-green.

"Look. Fairies." Andrew's voice cracked. "Can you count the fairies for me, Tommy? Can you count out loud?"

At thirty-six, Tommy's head began to droop. At forty-one the empty beer can tumbled to the ground.

"Oh." Tommy eyes opened wide, his face creased into a wide grin. He cupped both hands around a secret, fragile cargo for just a moment, then slid boneless down the willow.

Andrew settled next to him, hugged him tight, and drank the second bitter beer. He kissed his son's cheek one last time and lay the string of dragonflies on Tommy's wrist, bright against the pale, soft flesh.

"Sweet dreams," he whispered, and he closed his eyes.

The End

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