

VILLAGE VIEW

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The red-headed fourteen-year-old in the rear seat of his father's car scowled sulkily as his parents greeted their hostess. "He's shy," his father explained.

"That's okay," Carol smiled, "We're all shy at times. Come on in. Supper's 'most ready."

"Come on, Dave," Hank said firmly. The lad climbed out of the car. He was a slender wiry youngster, freckled about the nose, brown-eyed, and his jeans so new they squeaked. He stood still next to the car door, looking about him, looking anywhere except at the person he'd been brought to meet.

Suddenly he dropped to his knees at the edge of a patch of emerald-green moss beside the driveway. "Look, Dad, what's this stuff?" Carol knelt beside him, seeing as though for the first time the beauty of the delicate club moss, looking for all the world like a miniature forest of pine trees, and punctuated with maturing fruiting bodies, crimson-capped. Together they examined the moss, running their fingers over its velvety surface and watching the pollen scatter as the tiny blossoms were disturbed.

Shyness gone, David asked for a jar in which to collect some pollen. That was easy; every proper kitchen has a supply of small containers suitable for such a purpose.

Dave, it was soon apparent, was fascinated by natural flora and fauna. Since this was his first visit to Cape Cod and since he'd spent most of his short life in the midwest, Carol knew she'd have no trouble keeping him entertained.

"Is it okay if I hunt for bottles?" he asked. "Oh, Davey," his mother remonstrated, "Carol doesn't want you digging the place up."

"Actually, you know, he can't do any harm," Carol said, "and along the hollow that runs diagonally through the vacant lot there used to be an old road. You can dig out there all you want, Dave, if your Mother doesn't mind."

He set off equipped with a paper bag and a trowel. In no time at all he was back with a rattling sackful of old bottles and jars. "Look! Just look at all I found. There are plenty more out there, too," he exulted.

"Wash them off out here, please, not in the house, Dave. They're dirty. I'll give you some newspapers to wrap them with and another bag so they won't break. Get them good and clean and let them drain. Then you can sort out the ones you want and we can throw the rest away."

"Carol, do you mind if I look for salamanders?" David asked an hour or so later when the bottles were clean, dry, and packed away.

"Go right ahead. Where do you plan to look?"

"In your window wells. I'll clean out your window wells and see if any salamanders are living in them."

"I've never seen any, but go to it. You might find some hop toads. I've seen baby hop toads in the window wells."

While the grown-ups visited, David disappeared around the corner of the house. Fifteen minutes later he triumphantly produced a salamander. It was dark brownish-black with yellow spots, six or seven inches long, and remarkably sluggish. "Look at him. What kind do you think he is?" David asked.

"Let's see if we can find out," Carol suggested. She got out her Collins' Field Guide to American Wildlife and showed David how to look up salamanders. "Here he is, I think, '*Ambystoma maculatum*, our only salamander with two rows of large round yellowish spots on a bluish black back. Grows to 8 inches. Body stout, cheeks swollen, legs large, tail half length of body, underparts gray.' That's him, all right."

David was delighted. "Can I keep him? Can I take him home? Please, Dad, can I keep him?"

Hank looked uncomfortable. "Dave," Carol said. "I don't think he'd survive the trip, do you? Maybe it would be kinder to keep him only while you're here and let him go before you leave. We can fix up a box with earth and humusy leaves and a dish of water for him, but when it's time to start back home, let's plan to set him free."

"Sure. Okay." David was satisfied with the compromise. Carol produced a box and Dave busied himself the rest of the afternoon preparing a proper habitat for the salamander.

The next day David and his parents went to the beach where David collected shells and stones. "Where can I find some clams?" he asked Carol when they returned in the late afternoon.

"I'm not sure we can, but we can look. We'll walk over to the bay and see. Maybe we'll find some fiddler crabs instead, if the tide is low. We'll take along a bucket, just in case, and a rake."

"What's a fiddler crab?" David wanted to know.

"Look it up in the book; then we'll find some." Carol promised. When they reached the marshy edge of the bay, however, the tide was high. "We'll have to come back tomorrow, Dave. Sorry, but we can't find fiddlers except when the tide's out."

"When will it be out?"

"Probably tomorrow around noon. It's high now, so it will be low again before midnight. Then it will be high again early tomorrow morning. Around noon or one o'clock should be best, I think." Carrying the bucket and rake back home, Carol showed David where blueberries grow, taught him to identify poison ivy and how it differs from the harmless woodbine it resembles. They talked about tides and how the gravitational pull of the moon and the sun affects the rise and fall of the water. David learned the tide is high at different times at different places, depending on the currents and the distance the waters must flow to reach far into the deepest and narrowest inlets.

At noon the following day, David captured his first fiddler crab. Before the hour was out, he'd caught two dozen and the bottom of the bucket was covered with scabbling fiddlers, each one trying frantically to hide beneath the rest.

"Why don't we put some sand in the bucket, too, Dave, and a little sea water," Carol suggested, "then we can take them home. You can watch them while you're here, then let them go before you leave."

David, happy with the plan, carried the bucket home and spent an hour after lunch crouched in silence beside the bucket. Toward the end of the afternoon he said, "Carol, I think it's time now to take the fiddlers back, and to let the salamander go, don't you?"

"Yes, Dave. You go ahead. Next time you come to see me, we can get some more if you like."

David released the salamander and watched it wriggle under the damp leaves. Then he picked up the bucket and set out for the bay. His father kept looking anxiously through the trees after he'd been gone about ten minutes. "You don't think anything could happen to him, do you?"

No. He'll be fine. It's not easy to let them go, you know. It takes a little time," Carol said. And in less than five more minutes David returned. He rinsed out the bucket and put it where it belonged.

Then, without being prompted, he said, "Thanks, Carol. I've had a good time."

"I have too, David," Carol said solemnly. "And I hope you can come to see me again some time."