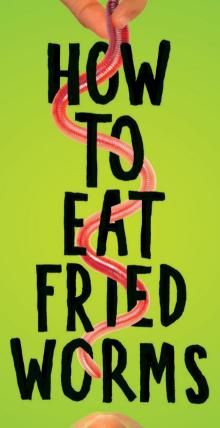


THOMAS ROCKWELL



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BY THOMAS ROCKWELL ILLUSTRATED BY EMILY MCCULLY

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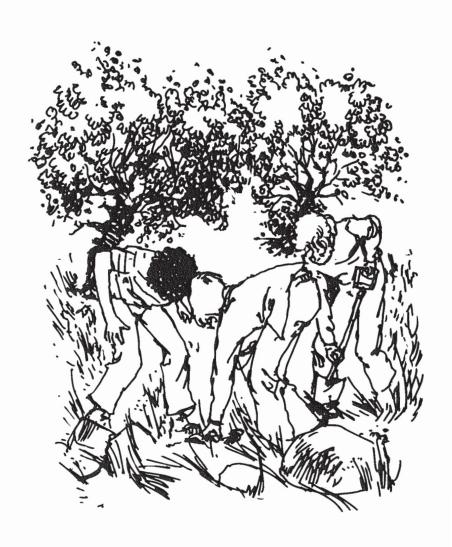
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THE BET

"Hey, Tom! Where were you last night?"

"Yeah, you missed it."

Alan and Billy came up the front walk. Tom was sitting on his porch steps, bouncing a tennis ball.

"Old Man Tator caught Joe as we were climbing through the fence, so we all had to go back, and he made us pile the peaches on his kitchen table, and then he called our mothers."

"Joe's mother hasn't let him out yet."

"Where were you?"

Tom stopped bouncing the tennis ball. He was a tall, skinny boy who took his troubles very seriously.

"My mother kept me in."

"What for?"

"I wouldn't eat my dinner."

Alan sat down on the step below Tom and began to chew his thumbnail.

"What was it?"

"Salmon casserole."

Billy flopped down on the grass, chunky, snubnosed, freckled.

"Salmon casserole's not so bad."

"Wouldn't she let you just eat two bites?" asked Alan. "Sometimes my mother says, well, all right, if I'll just eat two bites."

"I wouldn't eat even one."

"That's stupid," said Billy. "One bite can't hurt you. I'd eat one bite of anything before I'd let them send me up to my room right after supper."

Tom shrugged.

"How about mud?" Alan asked Billy. "You wouldn't eat a bite of mud."

Alan argued a lot, small, knobby-kneed, nervous, gnawing at his thumbnail, his face smudged, his red hair mussed, shirttail hanging out, shoelaces untied.

"Sure, I would," Billy said. "Mud. What's mud? Just dirt with a little water in it. My father says everyone eats a pound of dirt every year anyway."

"How about poison?"

"That's different." Billy rolled over on his back.

"Is your mother going to make you eat the leftovers today at lunch?" he asked Tom.

"She never has before."

"How about worms?" Alan asked Billy.

Tom's sister's cat squirmed out from under the porch and rubbed against Billy's knee.

"Sure," said Billy. "Why not? Worms are just dirt."

"Yeah, but they bleed."

"So you'd have to cook them. Cows bleed."

"I bet a hundred dollars you wouldn't really eat a worm. You talk big now, but you wouldn't if you were sitting at the dinner table with a worm on your plate."

"I bet I would. I'd eat *fifteen* worms if somebody'd bet me a hundred dollars."

"You really want to bet? *I'll* bet you fifty dollars you can't eat fifteen worms. I really will."

"Where're you going to get fifty dollars?"

"In my savings account. I've got one hundred and thirty dollars and seventy-nine cents in my savings account. I know, because last week I put in the five dollars my grandmother gave me for my birthday."

"Your mother wouldn't let you take it out."

"She would if I lost the bet. She'd have to. I'd tell her I was going to sell my stamp collection otherwise. And I bought that with all my own money that I earned mowing lawns, so I can do whatever I want with it. I'll bet you fifty dollars you can't eat fifteen worms. Come on. You're chicken. You know you can't do it."

"I wouldn't do it," said Tom. "If salmon casserole makes me sick, think what fifteen worms would do."

Joe came scuffing up the walk and flopped down beside Billy. He was a small boy, with dark hair and a long nose and big brown eyes.

"What's going on?"

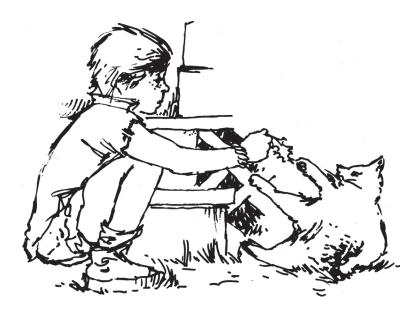
"Come on," said Alan to Billy. "Tom can be your second and Joe'll be mine, just like in a duel. You think it's so easy—here's your chance to make fifty bucks."

Billy dangled a leaf in front of the cat, but the cat just rubbed against his knee, purring.

"What kind of worms?"

"Regular worms."

"Not those big green ones that get on the tomatoes. I won't eat those. And I won't eat them all at once. It might make me sick. One worm a day for fifteen days."



"And he can eat them any way he wants," said Tom. "Boiled, stewed, fried, fricasseed."

"Yeah, but we provide the worms," said Joe. "And there have to be witnesses present when he eats them; either me or Alan or somebody we can trust. Not just you and Billy."

"Okay?" Alan said to Billy.

Billy scratched the cat's ears. Fifty dollars. That was a lot of money. How bad could a worm taste? He'd eaten fried liver, salmon loaf, mushrooms, tongue, pig's feet. Other kids' parents were always nagging them to eat, eat; his had begun to worry about *how much* he ate. Not that he was *fat*. He just hadn't worked off all his winter blubber yet.

He slid his hand into his shirt and furtively squeezed the side of his stomach. Worms were just dirt; dirt wasn't fattening.

If he won fifty dollars, he could buy that minibike George Cunningham's brother had promised to sell him in September before he went away to college. Heck, he could gag *anything* down for fifty dollars, couldn't he?

He looked up. "I can use ketchup or mustard or anything like that? As much as I want?"

Alan nodded. "Okay?"

Billy stood up.

"Okay."

DIGGING

"No," said Tom. "That's not fair."

He and Alan and Joe were wandering around behind the barns at Billy's house, arguing over where to dig the first worm.

"What d'ya mean, it's not fair?" said Joe. "Nobody said anything about where the worms were supposed to come from. We can get them anywhere we want."

"Not from a manure pile," said Tom. "That's not fair. Even if we didn't make a rule about something, you still have to be fair."

"What difference does it make where the worm comes from?" said Alan. "A worm's a worm."

"There's nothing wrong with manure," said Joe. "It

comes from cows, just like milk." Joe was sly, devious, a schemer. The manure pile had been his idea.

"You and Billy have got to be fair, too," said Alan to Tom. "Besides, we'll dig in the old part of the pile, where it doesn't smell much anymore."

"Come on," said Tom, starting off across the field dragging his shovel. "If it was fair, you wouldn't be so anxious about it. Would you eat a worm from a manure pile?"

Joe and Alan ran to catch up.

"I wouldn't eat a worm, period," said Joe. "So you can't go by that."

"Yeah, but if your mother told you to go out and pick some daisies for the supper table, would you pick the daisies off a manure pile?"

"My mother wouldn't ask me. She'd ask my sister."
"You know what I mean."

Alan and Tom and Joe leaned on their shovels under a tree in the apple orchard, watching the worms they had dug squirming on a flat rock.

"Not him," said Tom, pointing to a night crawler.

"Why not?"

"Look at him. He'd choke a dog."

"Geez!" exploded Alan. "You expect us to pick one Billy can just *gulp* down, like an ant or a nit?"

"Gulping's not eating," said Joe. "The worm's got to



be big enough so Billy has to cut it into bites and eat it with a fork. Off a plate."

"It's this one or nothing," said Alan, picking up the night crawler.

Tom considered the matter. It *would* be more fun watching Billy trying to eat the night crawler. He grinned. Boy, it was *huge*! A regular *python*. Wait till Billy saw it.

"We let you choose where to dig," said Alan.

After all, thought Tom, Billy couldn't expect to win fifty dollars by just gulping down a few measly little *baby* worms.

"All right. Come on." He turned and started back toward the barns, dragging his shovel.