



My Favorite Excerpt

Just because my entire troupe couldn't make it home for Thanksgiving didn't mean I'd skimp for those who did. Maybe the rewards of their efforts would trickle down to the others. I wasn't above bribery to lure my children home as often as possible.

I checked out and noticed the slate-grey sky as I drove home. Although we'd had a light snowfall during the last game, only the barest covering still glazed the ditches and fields. We needed a snowstorm, something to brighten up the gray days, to turn Minnesota into a winter playground.

Our Labradorish mutt, Gracie, met me at the door, her body wriggling with joy. Clearly she had something to tell me as she raced through the house, turned, and barreled back toward me at full speed. I slipped by her at the last second then set the groceries on the counter. She came bounding back and I rubbed behind her ears. “What is it, girl?”

She broke away and ran to the living room, barking, and I sauntered in behind her.

Draped across the sofa, as if it had trekked in off the lake and decided to take up residence in my living room, lay Bud’s Trout costume. All ten feet of glistening, scaly fish body. The head had been propped up on the pillow, the mouth hanging open, the tail unrolled onto my end table over my gold touch-on lamps.

Gracie barked again, as if to say, “*Holy smokes, Mom, what did Dad catch now?*”

“Very funny, Kevin.” My son must have come home over the lunch hour at school, or worse, before practice with his buddies, and arranged the sea creature on the sofa. I hated to think just how many people participated.

I walked over to the head. Picked it up. Stared at the eyes. As big as my fists, they stuck out like tennis balls, green and black little slits that looked more monstrous than fishy. I suppose it gave a threatening look to an otherwise helpless creature.

Inside, a mesh pocket for Bud’s—my—head held the piece in place. I debated trying it on, then put it on a chair.

Maybe I should try the suit first.

I picked it up, inspected it. I had thought it made of something stretchy, but the fabric turned out to be canvas, a grayish material that had been painted to sparkle and shine. It had no zipper, just pulled over one’s head, and as I stood there, strategizing my attack, a smell hit my nose like a bulldozer. Twenty plus years of body odor, probably from those days when an orange hunting suit would be too sweltering (which begged the question, what exactly did Bud wear when he didn’t wear his hunting suit?), erupted from the costume and I held it away from myself, eyes watering.

Not in a million, billion years . . . I felt sick and slumped onto the sofa.

“*You’re the greatest, Mom!*”

I heard it over and over in my head, to the tune of the pep band and the school song. *One game.* I had promised Kevin one game.

And he’d remember this forever. Sadly, the entire town probably would too.

I went to the bathroom, grabbed the lilac-scented air freshener, and doused the Trout. It got a full body spray and then a second coat. Twenty minutes later, the suit emanating the cloying scent of floral body odor, I pronounced it wearable.

The sun had begun to slink below the horizon. Mike would be home in an hour, and then I’d have some ’splaining to do. Unless I hid the suit until game day.

My pride heartily endorsed that option.

I would simply try it on quickly, to see if we needed any adjustments beyond refragrancing the costume, and then tuck it away in the garage, maybe under the lawn chair covers, until Saturday's game.

I decided to go in from the top. I sat on the sofa and began to tuck the body up over mine. However, I hadn't accounted for the miles of canvas material that refused to bend as I attempted to force my feet to the bottom. Not only that, but the neck caught just below my hips, and I realized that I'd have to attack from a different angle. I stretched the costume along my living room floor, then, getting on my hands and knees, I wriggled into it, arms upstretched to slide into the fins. I popped my head through the top and rolled onto my side, kicking my feet free. A good foot of material hung past them, but I might be able to pin it up. Or duct tape it. Or sew it with heavy duty fishing line, suitable for a fifty pound muskie.

I discovered that the fins had hand holes, access for such useful things as attaching the head. But first, I had to get up.

I rolled to my stomach and, realizing I couldn't move my legs, returned to my side, where I drew up my knees. A sweat had started to break out along my back and the body odor revived.

Somehow, using all the arm strength I possessed, and thankful that I'd beefed them up with the two turkeys I'd hauled home, I pushed myself to my hands and knees. Instead of putting one leg out, I simply straightened my legs, leaving my hands on the floor.

My eyes began to water from the burn in my hamstrings as I reached for the sofa, then the table, and finally worked myself up to a standing position.

I was breathing like a sprinter by the time I got vertical. And I still had yet to move. I pictured Bud's antics on the bench and wondered how he'd had the strength to walk, let alone jump.

No wonder the poor man had a heart attack.

Which reminded me that I needed to send Marge a card.

I pulled up the edge of the costume and found that the cutout legs allowed more movement than I imagined. I decided to take a little gander in the mirror.

I shouldn't have. I stood there in front of the bathroom sink, speechless. What had looked like a sleek lake creature on Bud resembled on me a rumpled, fat wide-mouthed bass who'd eaten one too many worms. Instead of running down my back in an intimidating razor, the dorsal fin wobbled and lurched as if the fish had hit a metal piling hard early in its life. I couldn't even walk right. The costume made me wobble from side to side.

I was a drunk, fat, crippled bass.

Kevin would be horrified.

I had to get out of this costume. And out of town. As quickly as my SUV would carry me.

I heard the mudroom door open, then shut.

Panic rushed over me. I began to wriggle, struggling to pull my arms out of the fins, to push the costume over my head.

Steps down the hallway. Oh, please, God, if You care about me at all . . .

I only had one choice. I flopped down on the bathroom floor and began to squirm my way out of the contraption.

“What in the Sam Hill are you doing?”

I froze. Mike’s voice. I couldn’t look at him. Really—I couldn’t move. The costume had pinned me down with just my nose showing. I glanced sideways, and all I saw was a slice of the toilet. And then Mike’s black steel-toe boots. I felt hands lift me. Set me upright.

I pulled the suit back into place. I couldn’t bear to face Mike. And I refused to look in the mirror. I turned my head and looked out the window. It had started to snow. Soft, fluffy flakes that would turn our town to white. I would simply hobble outside and just let it bury me, encased in scales.

“What . . . is . . . this?”

I closed my eyes to Mike’s barely audible words. He sounded like he might be asphyxiating on his own laughter.

“I agreed to . . .” I couldn’t say it. Just those three words attested to how far I’d lost my mind.

“Be a fish.”

I winced, nodded.

“Have I told you how much I love you recently?”