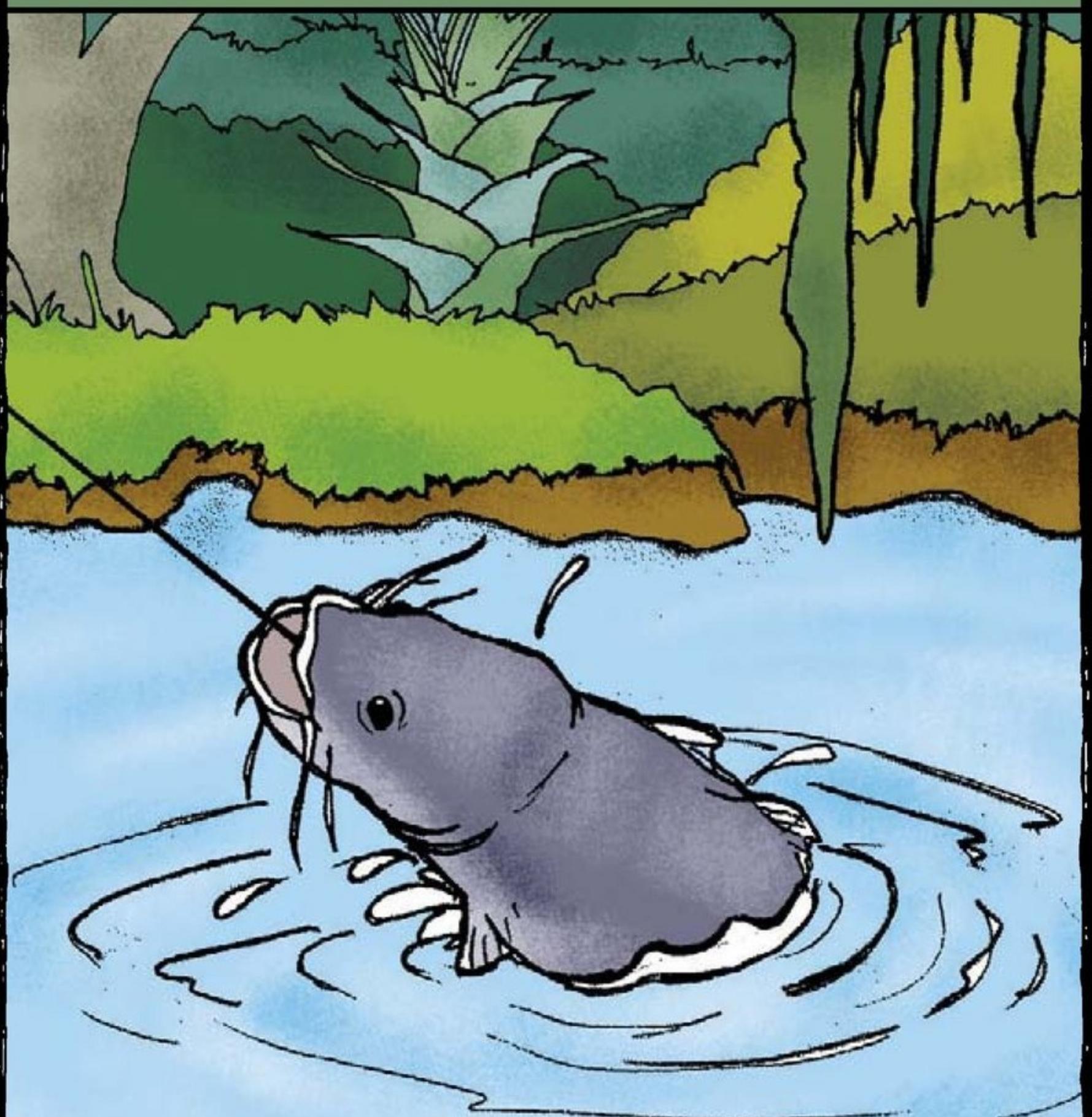


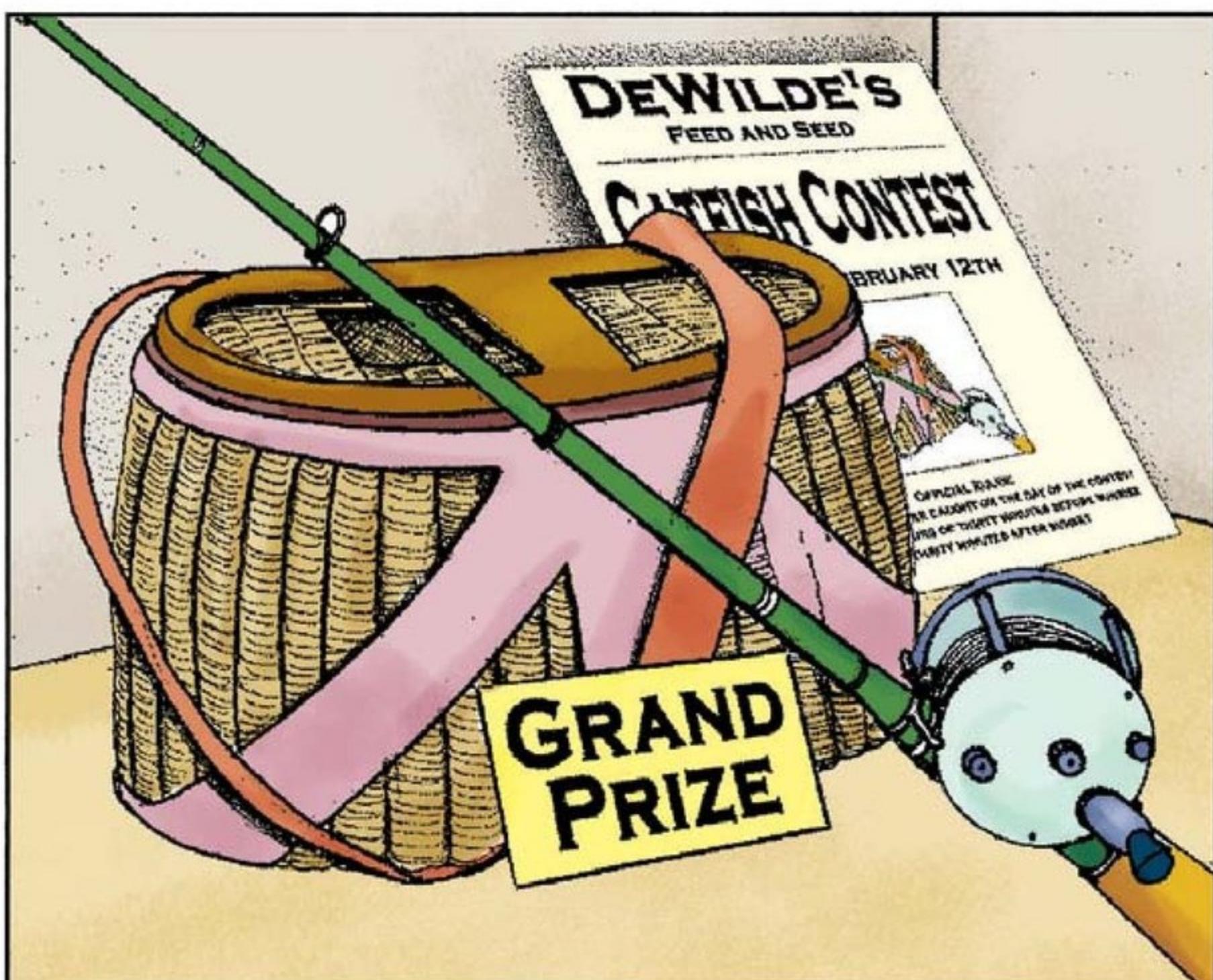
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Fishing in Simplicity

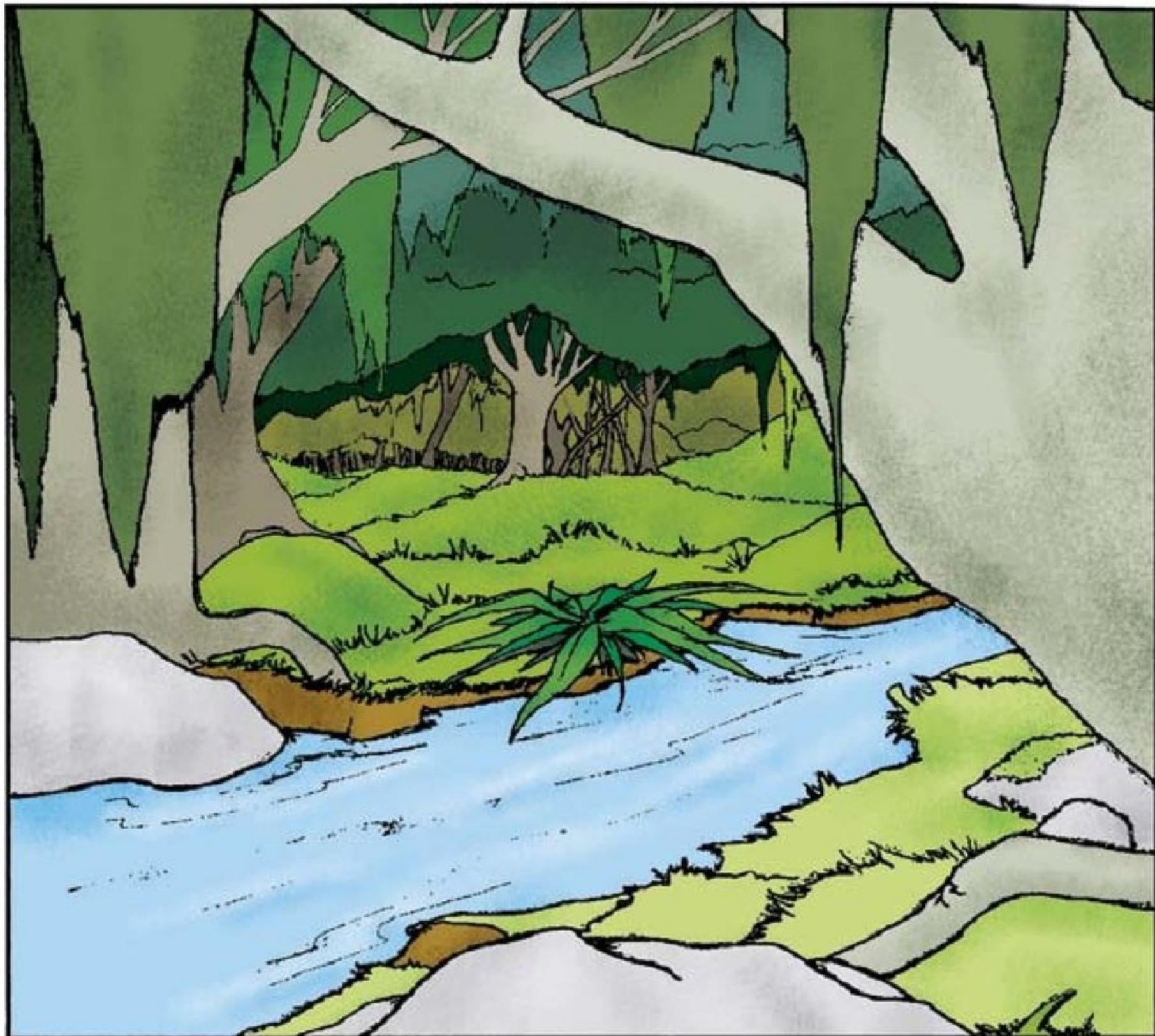


Written by Stephen Cosgrove
Illustrated by Kevin McCarthy

Fishing in Simplicity



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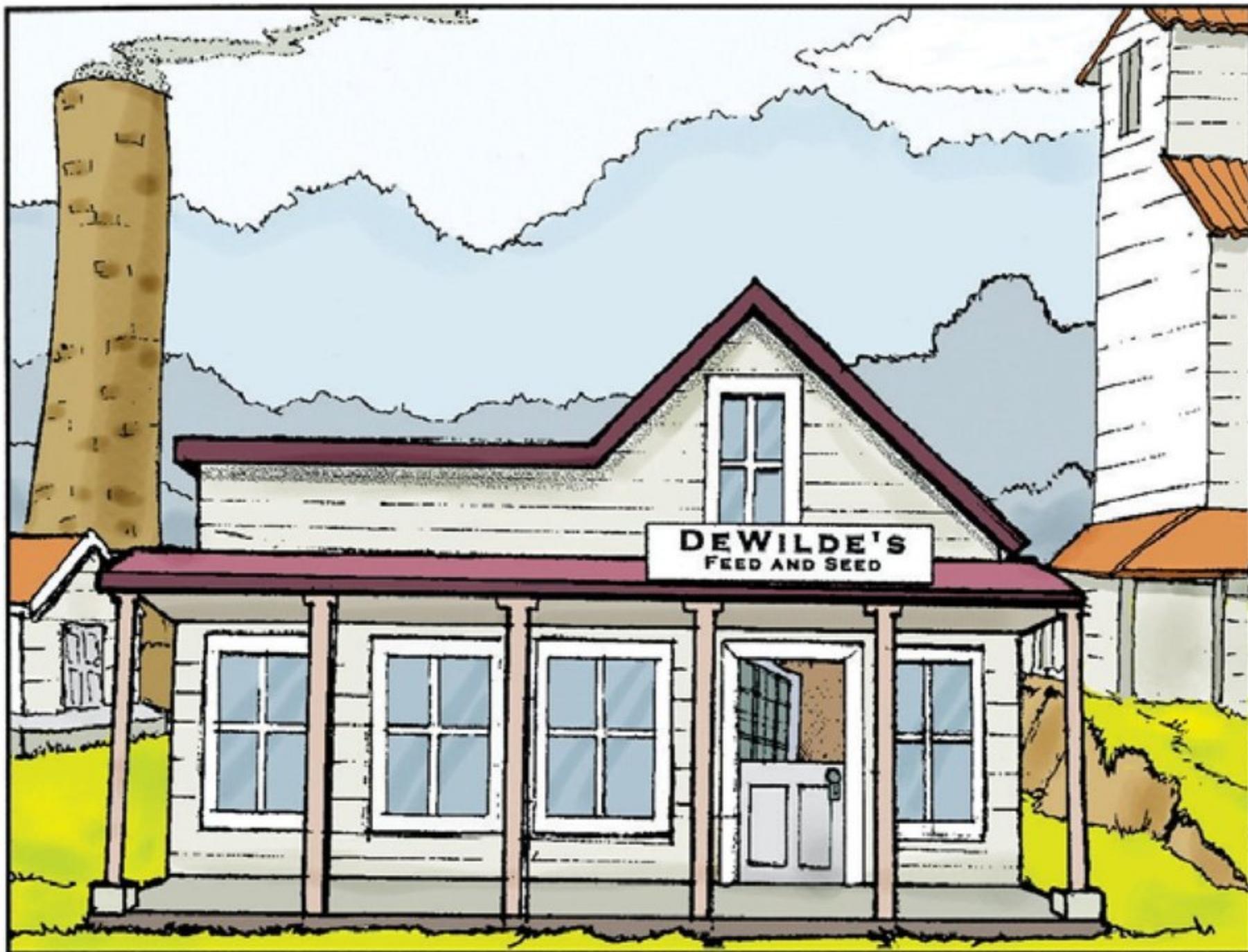
I live in Louisiana, not far from Lake Charles. It's a backwater kind of place surrounded by bayou and meandering molasses streams, water barely moving at all. The streams know they're eventually going to end up lost in the ocean—a drop in the bucket, so to speak—and they're in no hurry to get there. This is as good a place as any to meander, "this" being my hometown— Simplicity, Louisiana. There isn't much to the town. I guess that's why the name fits so well.



It was on these Simplicity backwaters when I was eight years old that I made what I thought was the most historical of discoveries. Any one of a hundred lazy summer nights, my granddaddy would tell the story of an old house lost in the swamps where slaves used to hide out before the Civil War. The old house is gone, but his story has it that the place kind of lights up once in a while, all filled with ghosts and such. The only remnant of the house is a staircase that seems to go nowhere. That's why, I suppose, they call it Nowhere House.

That's why, when I found an old stone staircase that butted up against a sinkhole filled with water that fed Syrup Creek, I thought for sure I had found Nowhere House. My granddaddy just laughed and laughed. He said it was the old Deucane place that washed away in the flood of '63. There's nothing left except for thirteen steps up and a long drop to the water.

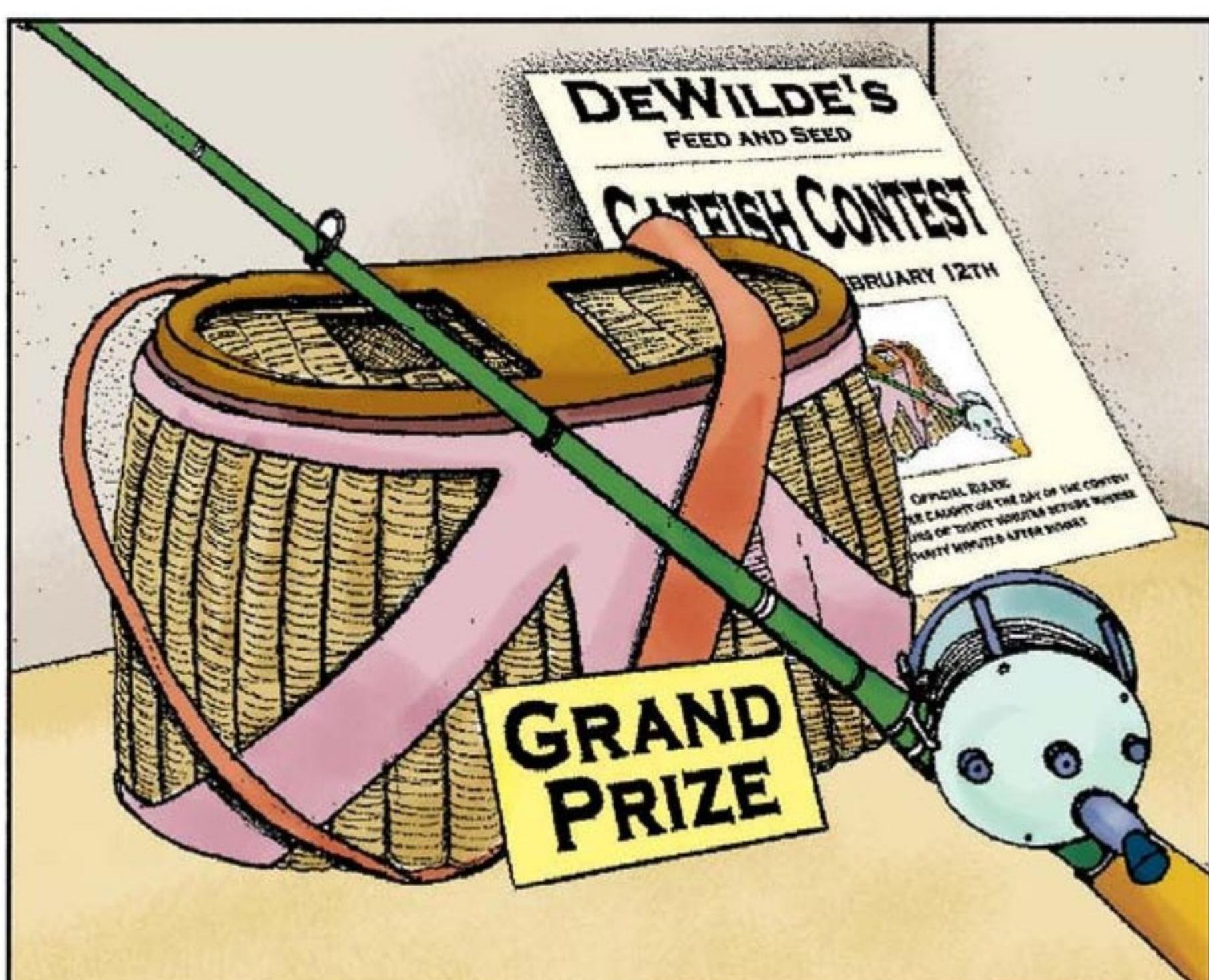




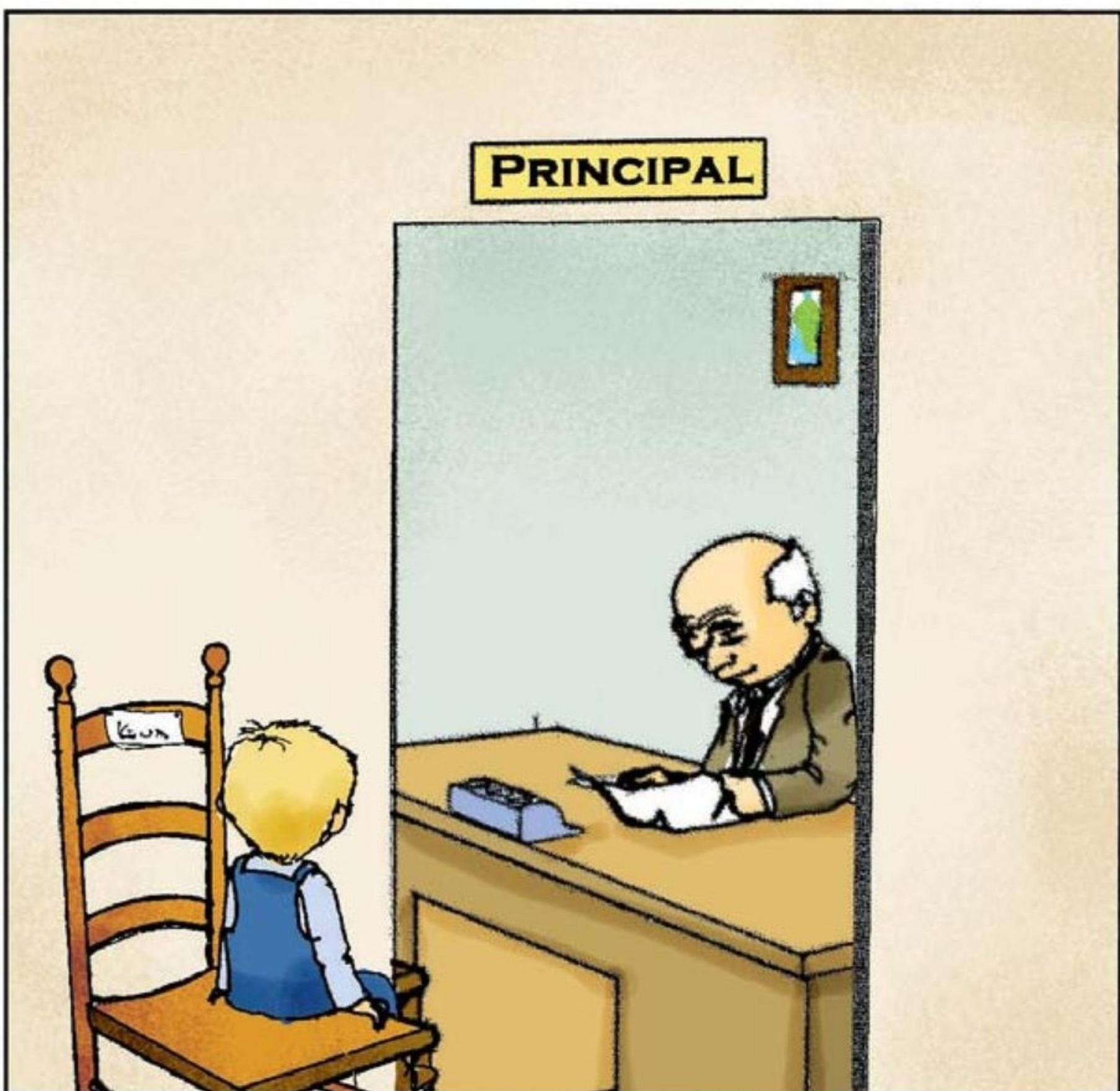
Fewer than a thousand people live in Simplicity, and most of them work for DeWilde's Feed and Seed or they don't work at all. DeWilde's does about everything: it's a flour mill where grain is ground, and they even have a shed out back where cayenne pepper is made into a hot sauce that would leave blisters on the sun. In front of the flour mill and lumberyard is the big store where you can buy anything and everything: a quart of fresh milk, barbecue sausages, persimmons, live crawdads, and even fishing tackle and lures.

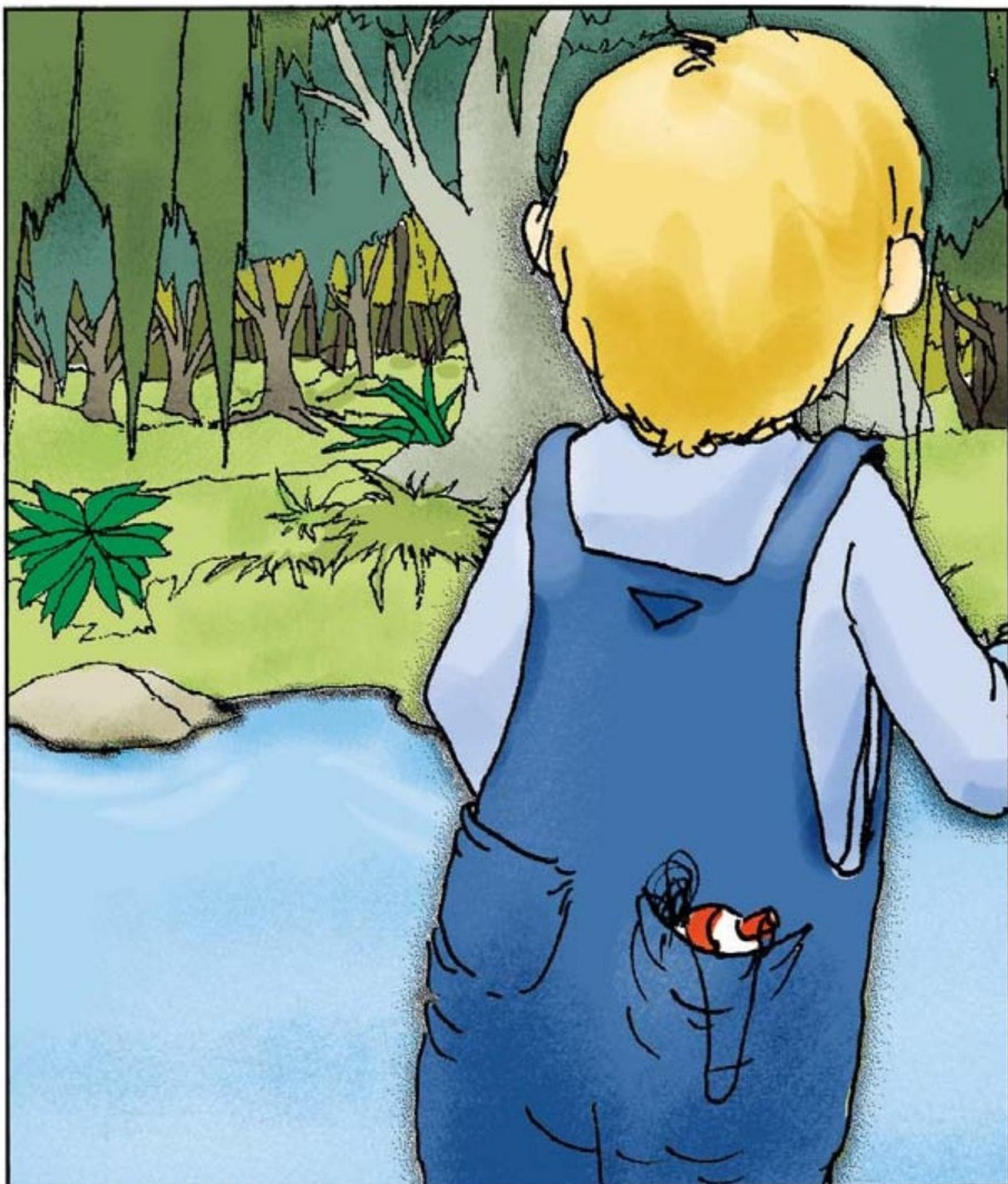
It was the fishing tackle that drew me to DeWilde's. When I was nine, I didn't have two nickels to rub together, but that never stopped me from wishing up and down the fishing aisles.

Early spring of my tenth birthday, DeWilde's decorated the main window on the big front-porch side of the store with a fishing pole and all the rigging. It wasn't one of those long cane poles like my granddaddy used—it was a spinning reel with a pole made of fiberglass.



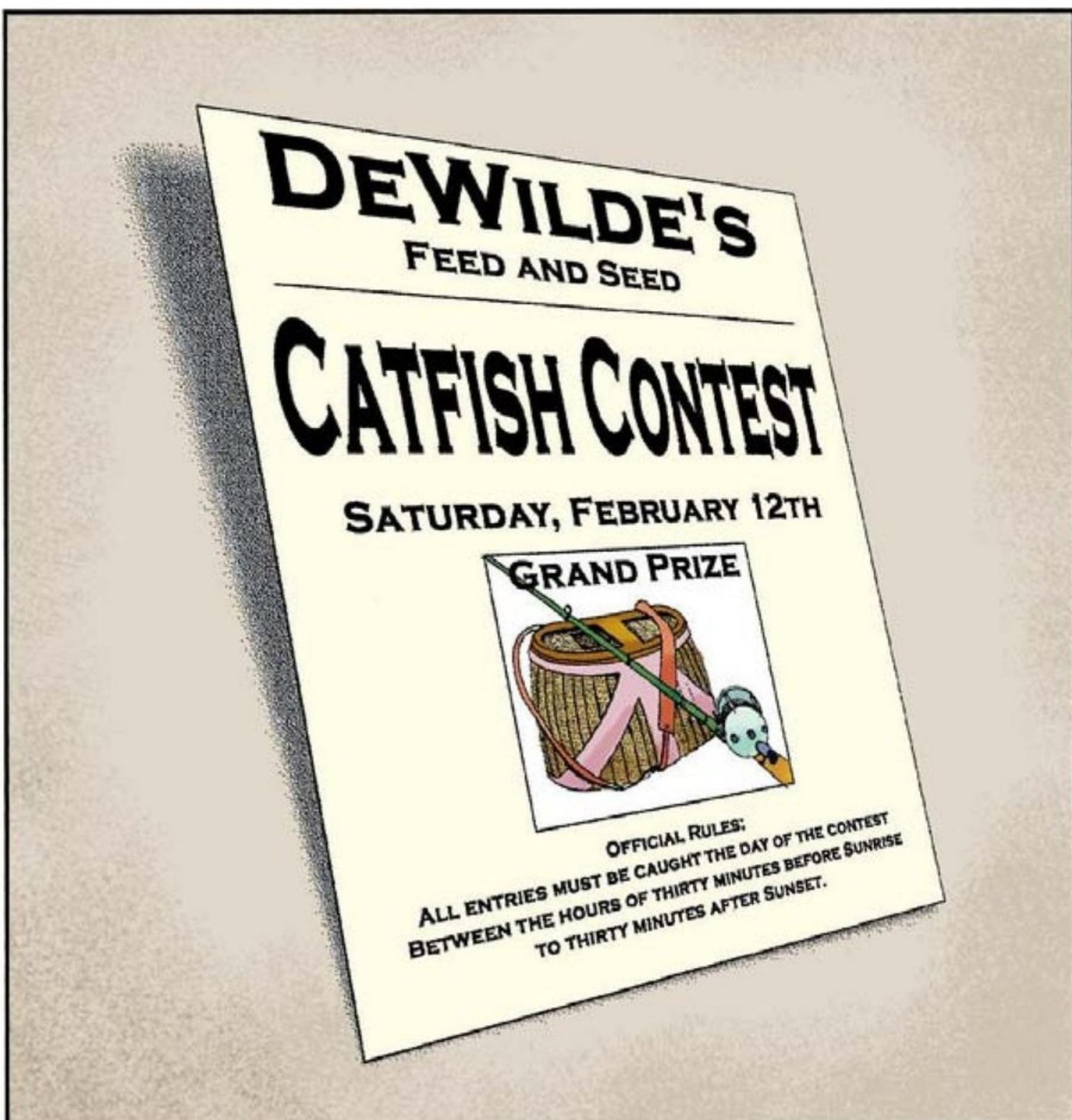
I wanted that pole in the worst of ways. Early in the morning before the sun heated everything beyond intolerable, I stood beside that window and stared. I don't know how many times I found myself standing there staring when I heard the school bell ring on the other side of town. I was late so many times that the principal, Mr. Dusard, taped a piece of paper with my name on it to the chair outside his office.





Now, I loved to fish—there was nothing better—but I didn't have a fancy rig. I only had a length of fishing line with a bobber and a barbless hook tied to the end. I always kept the line rolled up in my pocket because I just never knew when a fishing opportunity was going to happen.

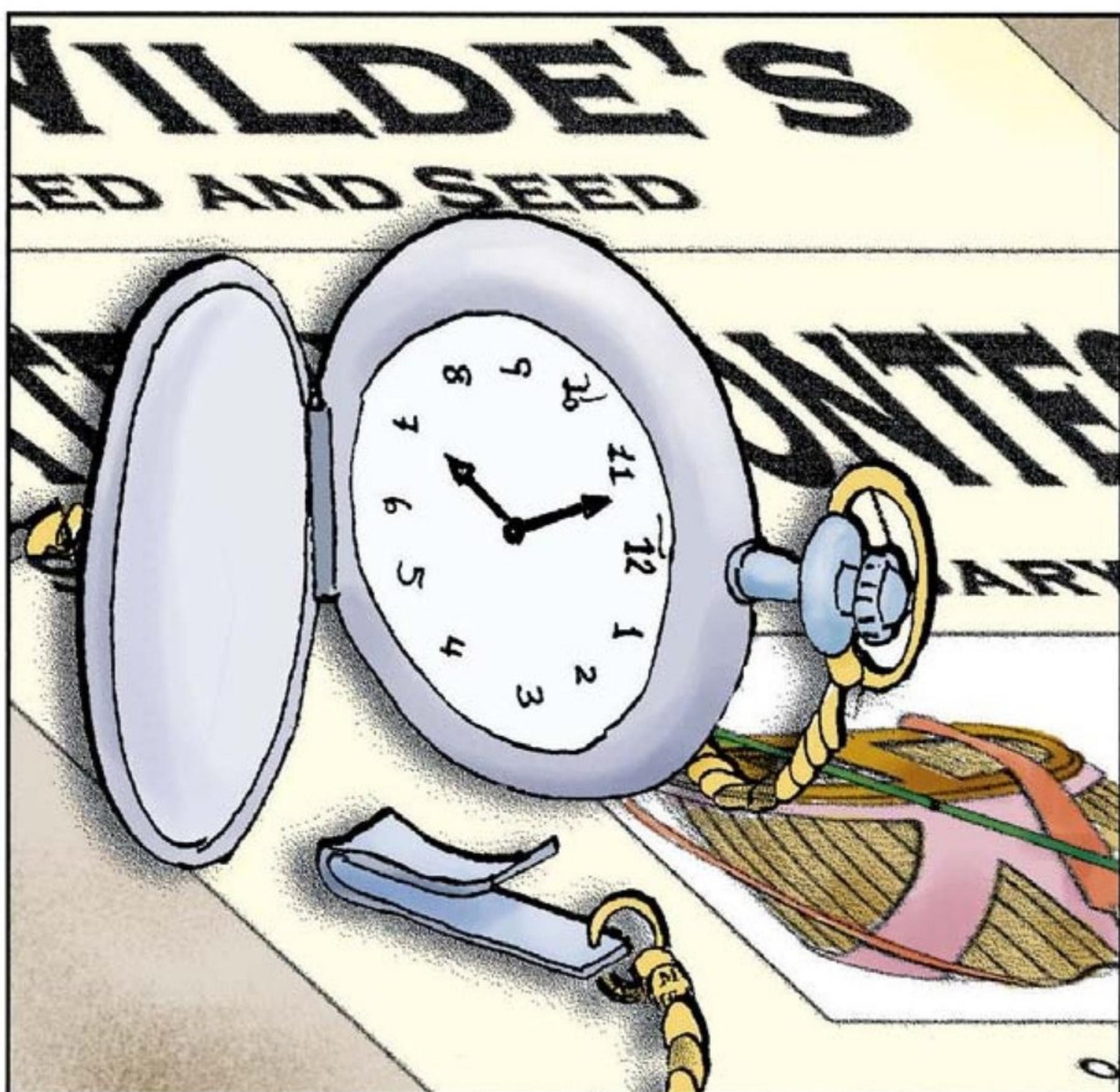
Sometimes opportunity does knock, and when it does, you'd better open the door fast before it runs away. On Wednesday, two weeks after Easter, there was a sign at DeWilde's. The sign told of a catfish-catching contest. Not a big deal in Simplicity—we have catfish-catching contests all the time. What made this special was the prize: the pole and reel in the window.

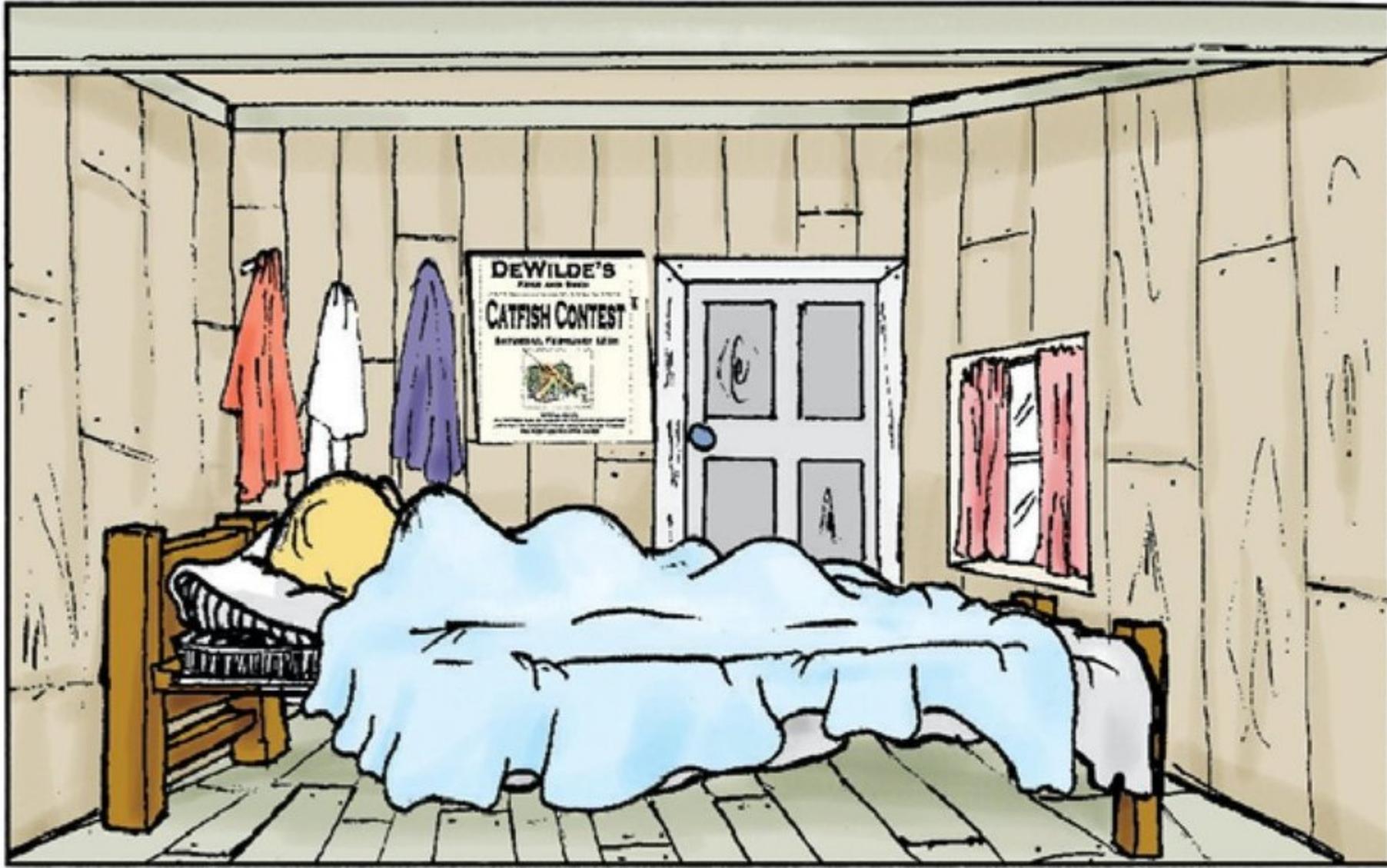


granddaddy,
I know you think you are
going to win the catfish Contest.
I am sorry, but the best fisherman
in all of Jefferson Parish is going to
win. Me!
Your grandson

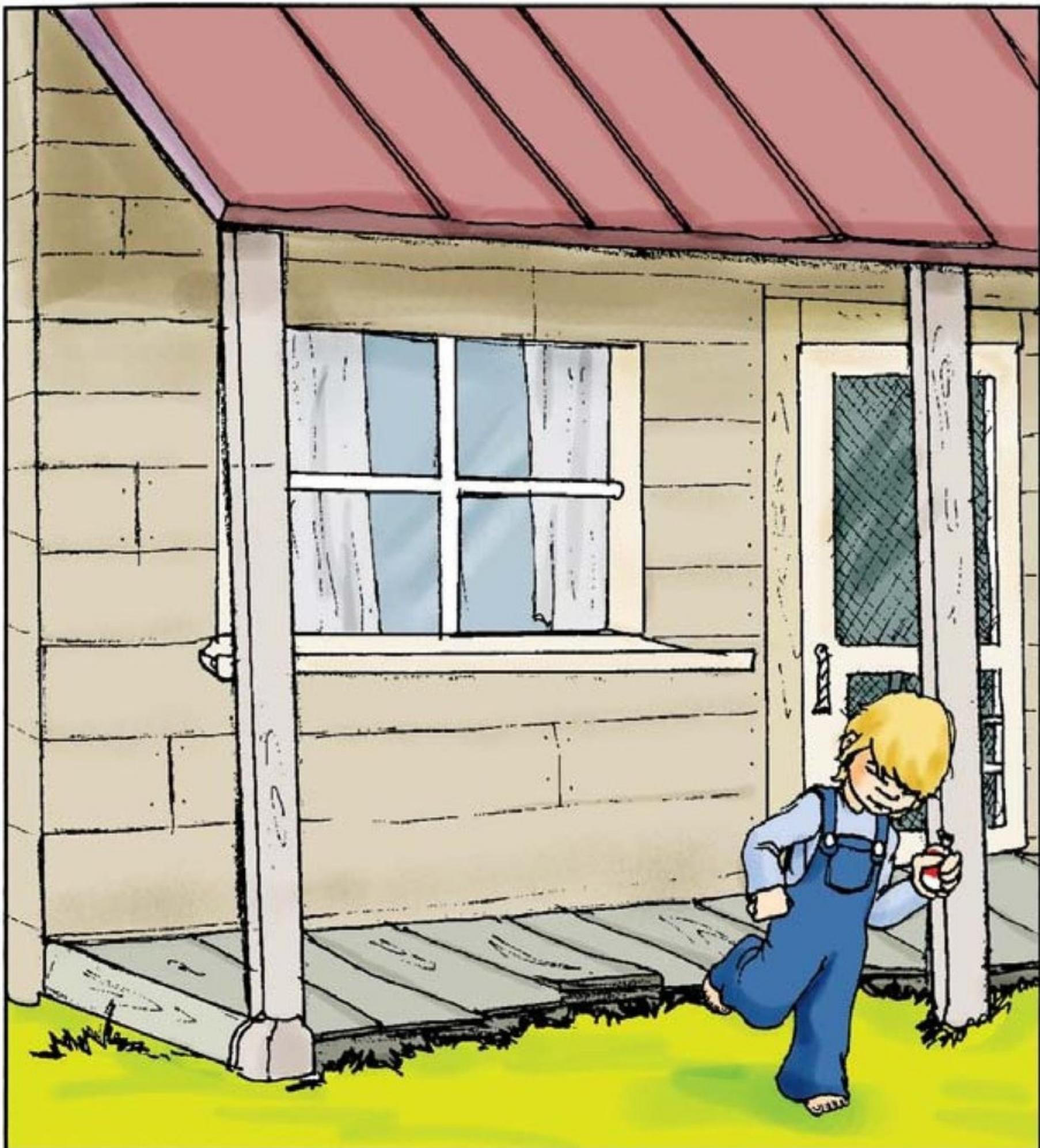
I may have only been ten years old, but I had a better feeling for catfish than any of the adults in town. Even my granddaddy said so, and that was hard for him because he was pretty good in his own right. He was enchanted by the competition himself. You see, he fished with a big old cane pole and a single line, and that fancy rig would do him real proud. It was my granddaddy who first taught me how to fish, but I kept on learning. That pole was going to be mine, and I told him so. So there ended up being a contest within the contest—me against my granddaddy. But my granddaddy never knew that I had a secret plan.

There were two basic rules: You could only catch one catfish fresh on the day of the contest, and there was a time limit. Since most folks who live here don't have a watch, the contest was ruled to be over half past dark, thirty minutes after sunset, no exceptions. In other words, if you were fishing and it got dark and all, you'd better hightail it to DeWilde's with whatever you had caught.





I got off to a really bad start. My granddaddy intentionally let me sleep in. He didn't try to wake me at all. He brewed himself a thermos of coffee and sneaked on down to the creek. I woke up sweating with the sun full on my face, a bad sign that it was ten o'clock or so. I should have given up on my secret plan then and there, but like my granddaddy, I'm not one to give up on much of anything. I pulled on some faded jeans, yanked on a T-shirt, and stuffed the rolled line into my pocket. I didn't wear shoes. It was hot, and I always thought shoes were bad luck anyway. I needed all the luck I could get now.



The slam of the screen door woke the neighbor's dog as I bolted from the house and trotted down Chigger Creek Lane. It wasn't much of a road, more of a dirt rut that wound through the swamp cedar and weeping magnolia. Along the way, I could hear granddaddy down at the creek laughing at me as I passed on by.

Though it was late, I stuck to my plan: fishing from the top step of the flooded Deucane place. I just had a feeling that there was a big cat there with my name on it, just like on my chair at the principal's office.

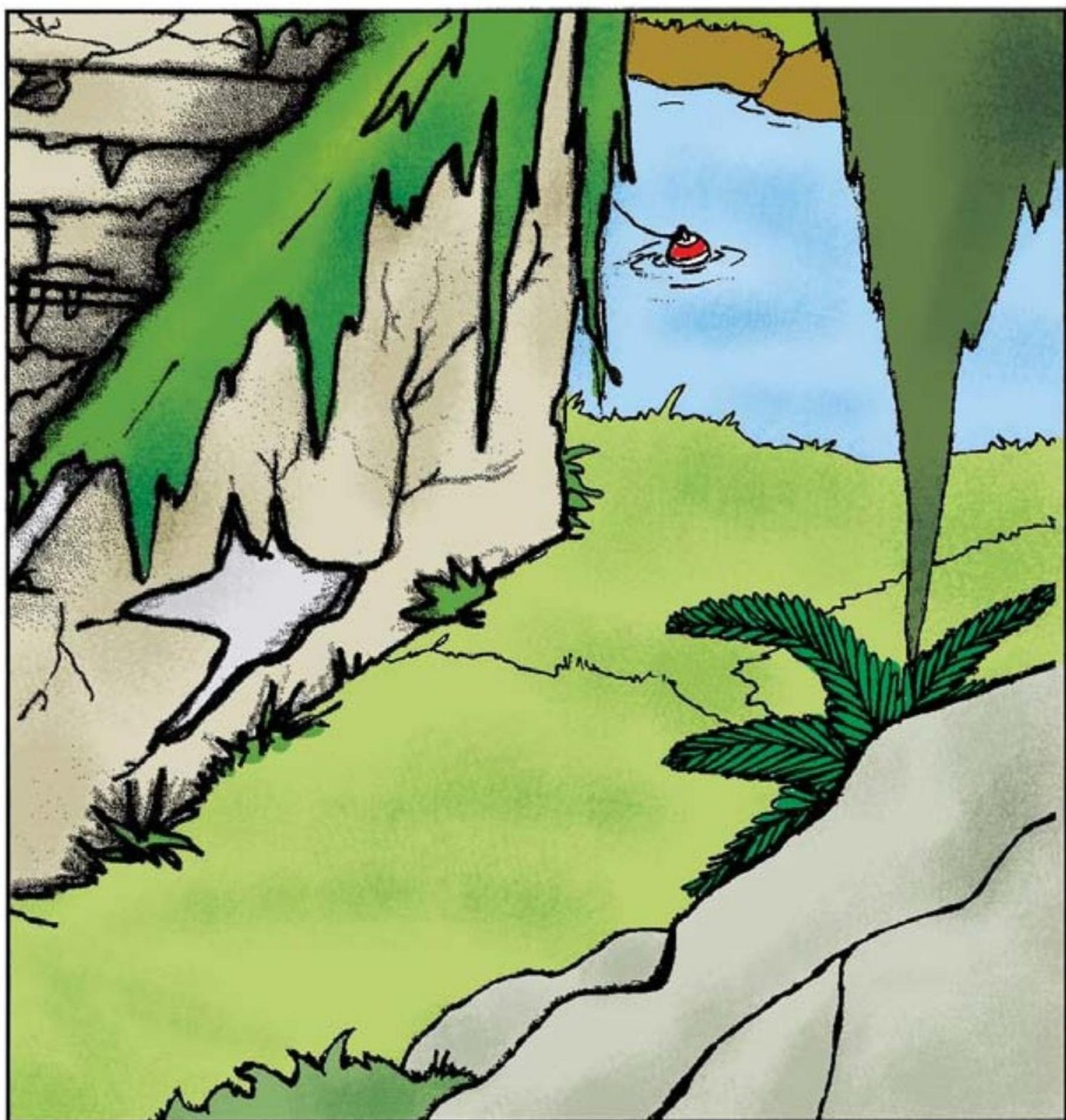




I climbed up the moss-covered stairs and pulled the line from my pocket. I sat down at the top, my legs dangling over, reflecting in the still waters of the sinkhole. I reached over and pulled back a slab of thick French moss. There, all white and juicy, were the biggest, plumpest grubs you ever saw. I skewered one onto my barbless hook and let it drop squiggling into the water. It sank from sight; the red and white bobber was the only sign that something was up.

I kind of hunched my shoulders and waited because that is the best thing and the only thing you can do if you're going to catch contest-winning catfish.

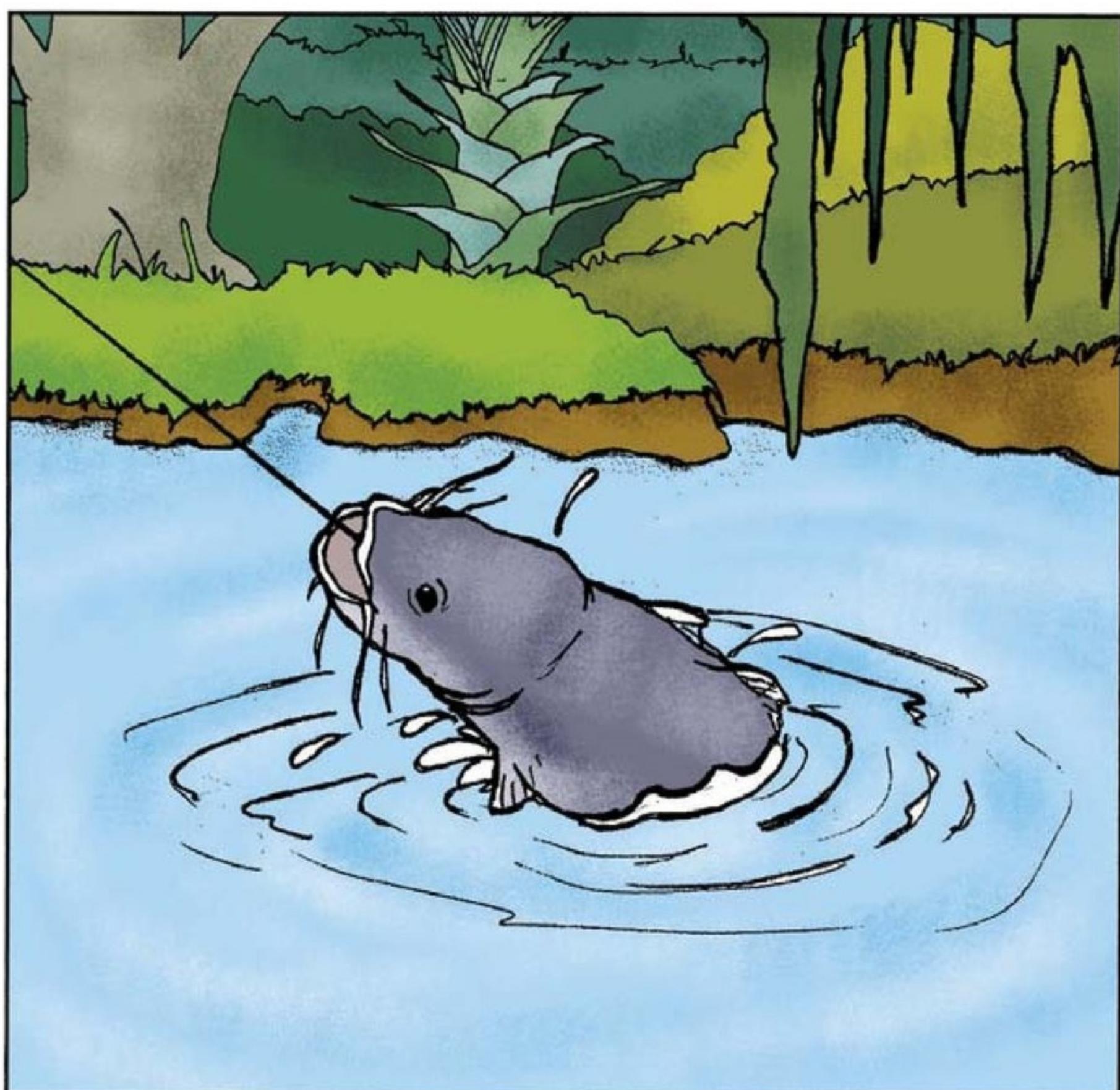
The sun bore down, crisping my face, and in the distance I could hear my granddaddy bragging about how he'd already won and that I might as well give up.

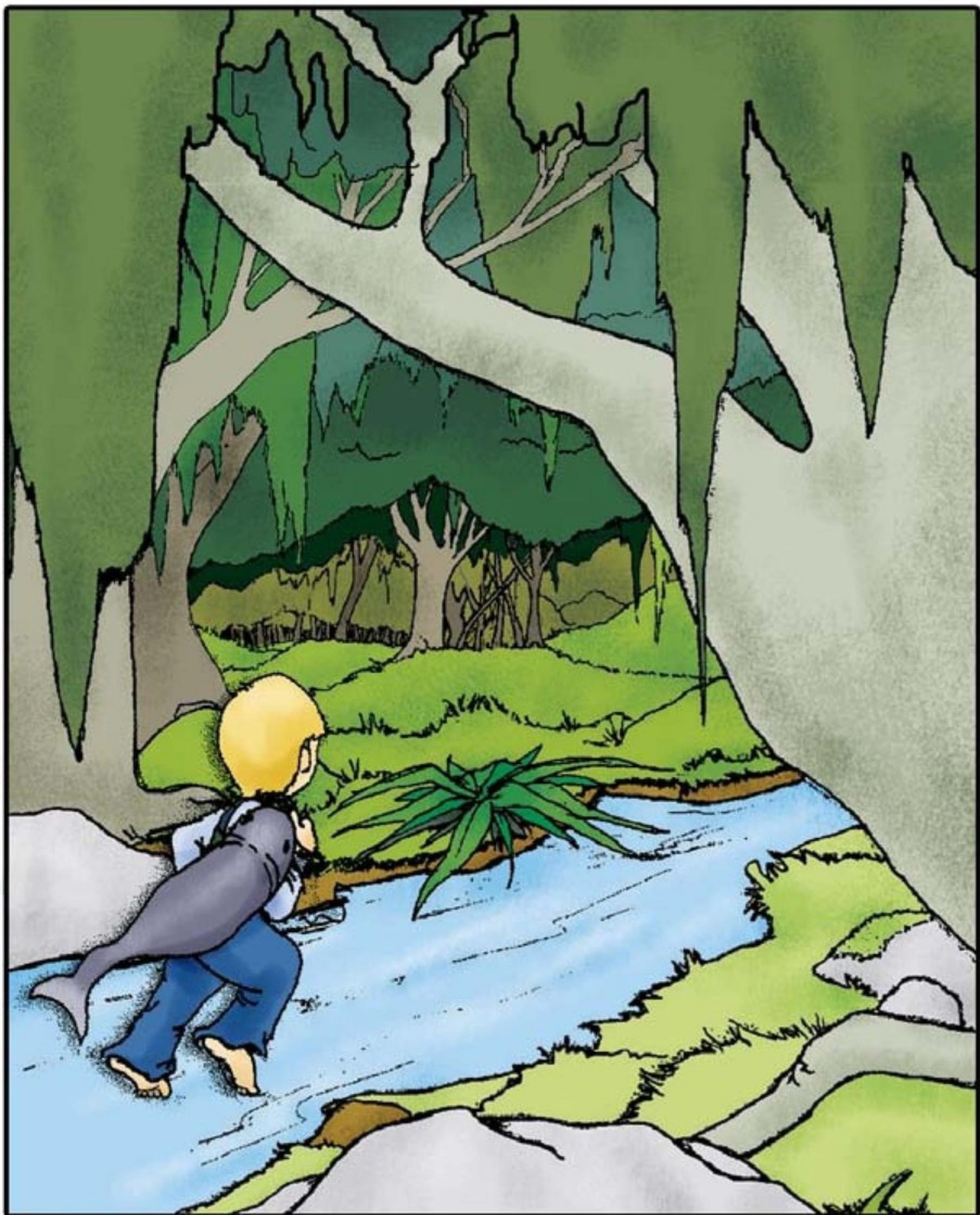




I never gave up. With the light slipping under the bracken and skipping off the black water, I changed bait for the eighth time without a nibble. Just as the sun dropped lower than my hopes, the bobber slowly slipped down in the water and disappeared deep. It was the hit I had been waiting for.

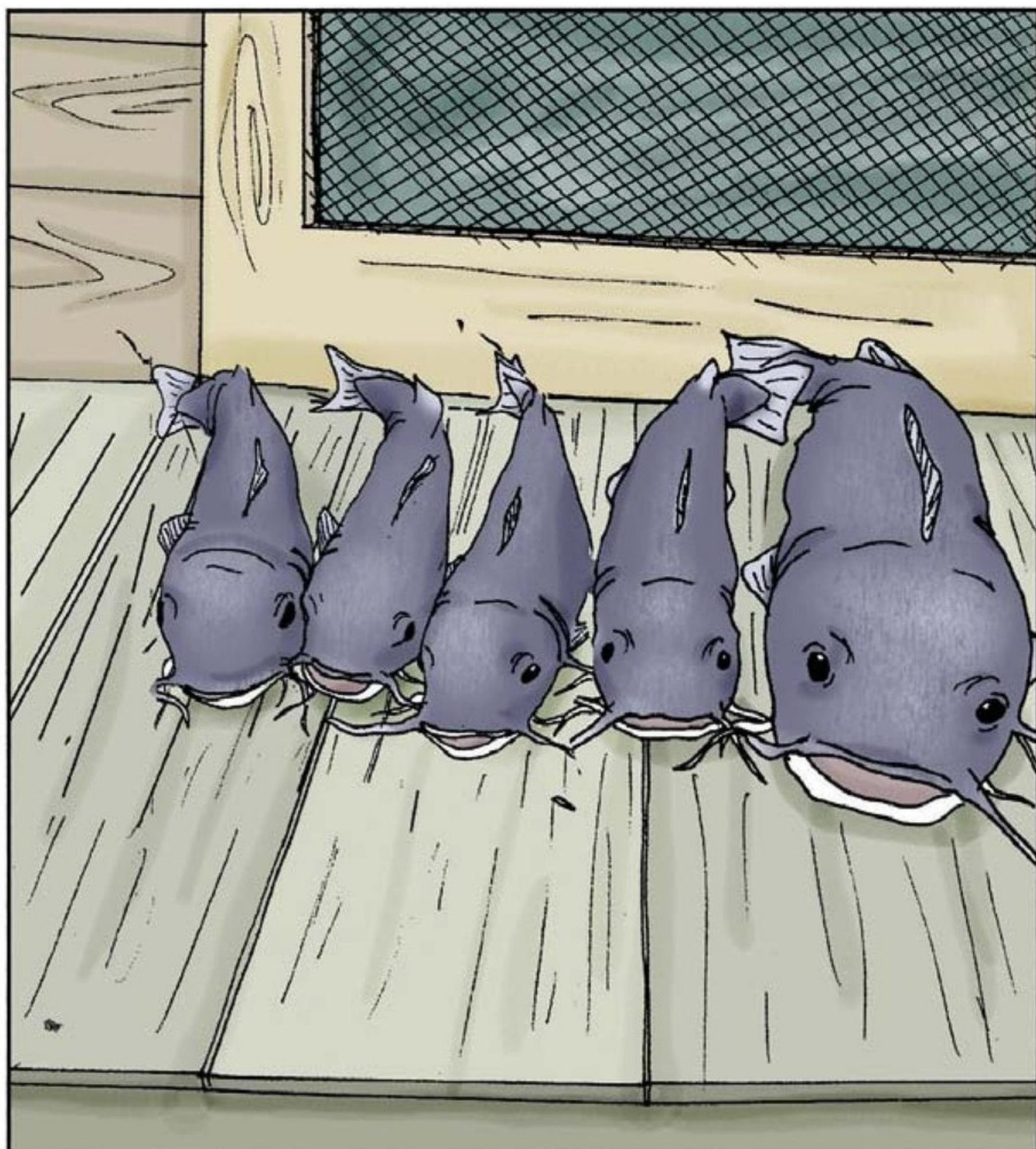
I let the line slip through my hands,
patiently waiting to set the hook. When there
was less than two feet of line left, I wrapped it
around my right hand and hauled back hard.
There was a return tug that nearly pulled me
off the step, and then inch by inch
I started reeling in that whale of a catfish.
Old Moby was strong, and the skin on my
hands was shredded like birthday ribbon
where he pulled the line through my palms.

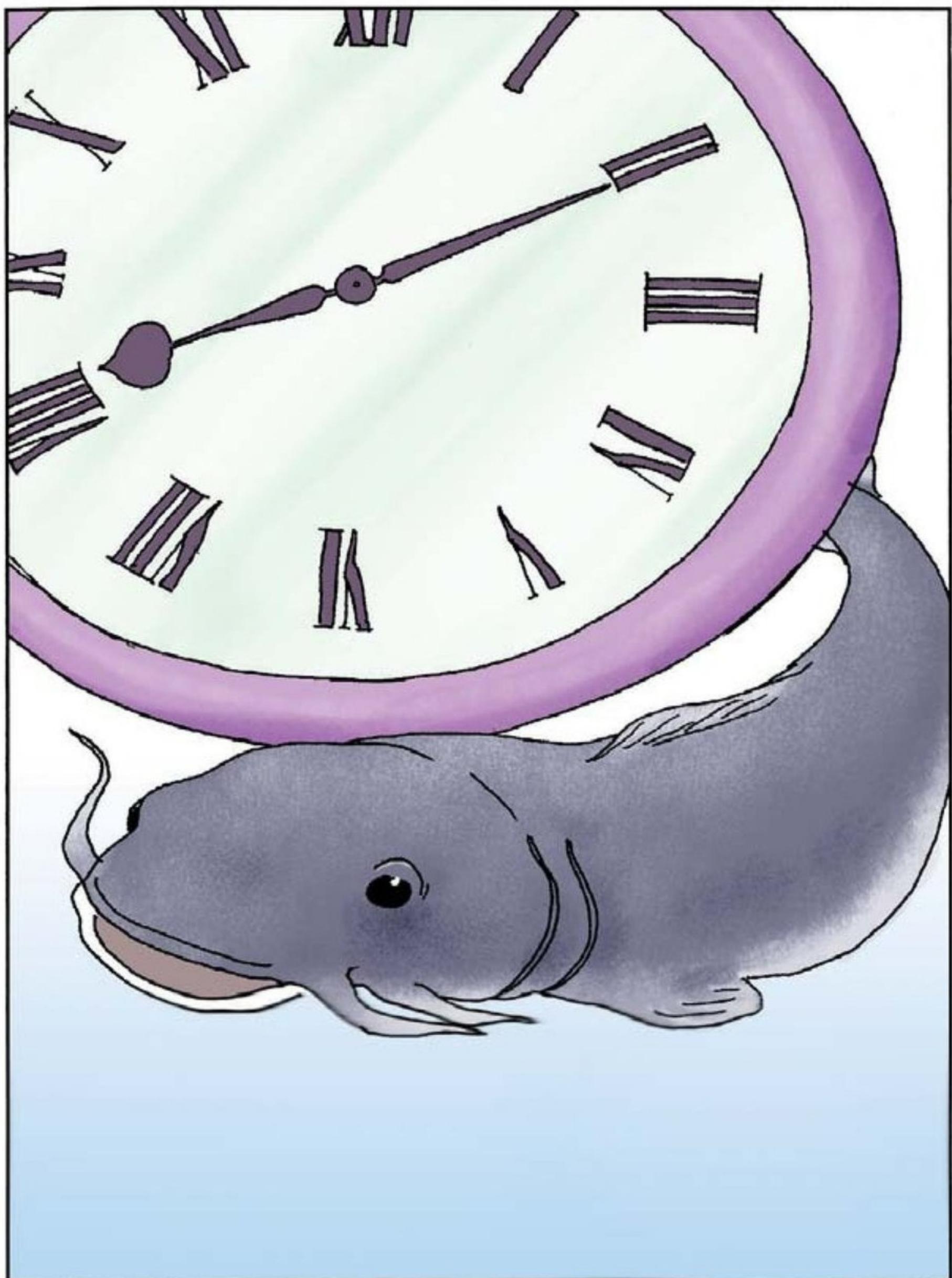




By the time I got that beast out of the water, it was dark and I could barely see it, but my arms and back could feel the mighty weight. It was the fishing pole for sure. It being dark and all, I had less than thirty minutes to get to DeWilde's.

With the prize heavy on my back, I ran.
I slipped three times, fell twice, and finally
ripped up the steps of the Feed and Seed.
Inside was packed with town folk. I must
have been a sight to see—hands bleeding,
jeans torn from falling—but I was there.
From the looks of things, my catfish, Old
Moby, was the biggest fish caught.





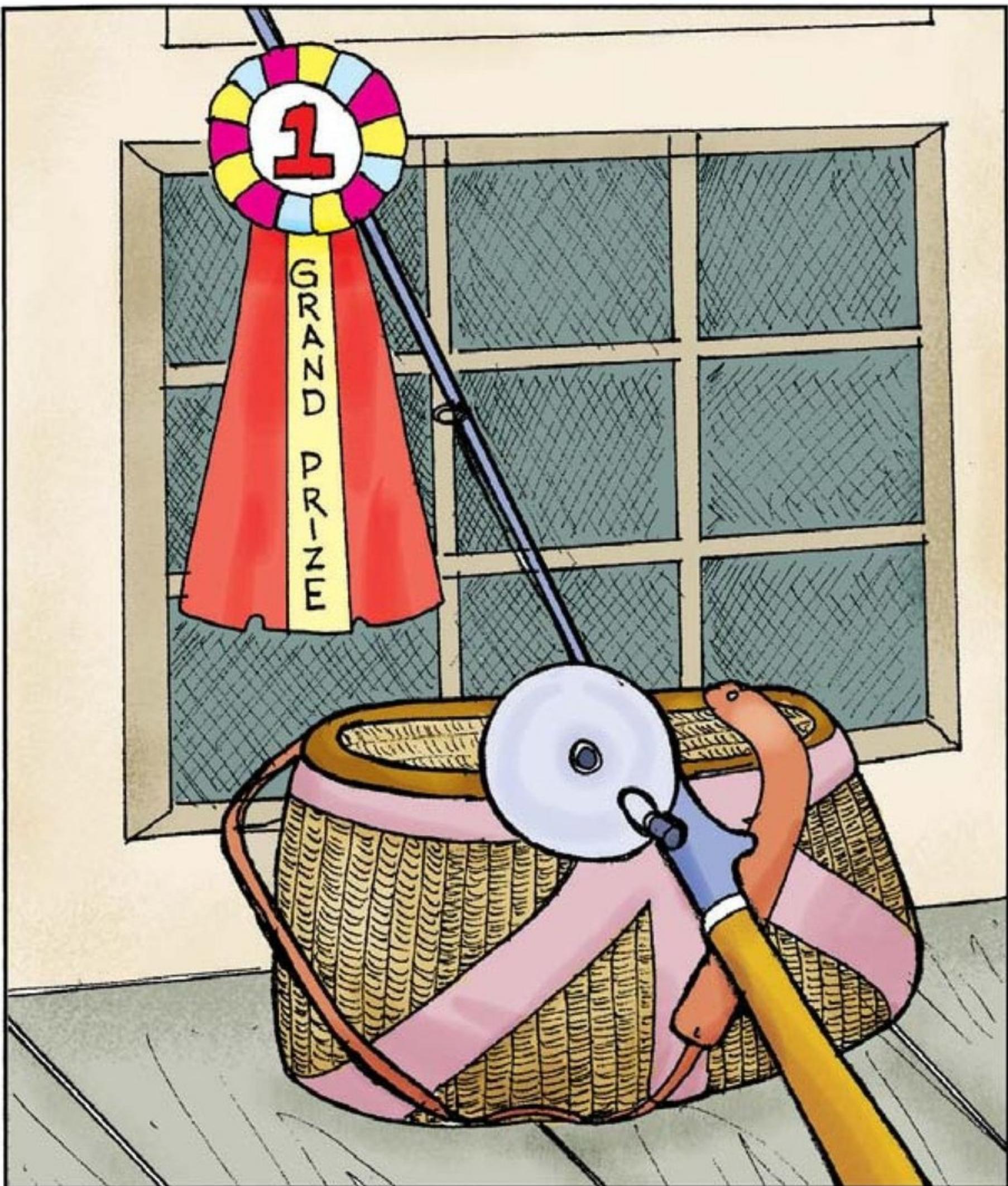
Later, there was no question that I had truly caught the biggest fish.

Later, there was no question that I truly was ten minutes late.

There was no question that my granddaddy won first prize with his puny little catfish that was half the size of Old Moby.

All in all, it still didn't end too badly. While the womenfolk cooked the catfish, men—grown men—gathered around me and bragged on my skill.





Kind of made me feel all grown up.

My granddaddy never found out
that my secret plan was to give the pole
to him anyway.

Things kind of always work out that way
in Simplicity, my hometown.

Fishing in Simplicity
Level R Leveled Book
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