Frog Swamp
and the Wild Pickles

by Michael Erlewine
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For Iris and my grandkids
INTRODUCTION

My five-year-old granddaughter Iris is learning to read, so I have been writing her letters, which she likes to receive. And she writes me letters back. I heard that in my letters, she especially likes the little stories, if I tell them. OK, I will write her some stories, although I am not a fiction writer. However, I do have a good imagination.

And so, I wrote a couple stories and sent them to Iris. Then, I sat down and wrote a short story on top of that, just a trial story to see if Iris likes it. It is called “Frog Swamp and the Wild Pickles.”

If Iris does like this longer story, I can write more chapters for it. I include it here because I have nothing more to share with you as to how I spent my time yesterday.

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FROG SWAMP
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William Bigsly lived in Traverse City, right up by Lake Michigan, one of the largest lakes in the world. One thing that William (we can call him Willy) liked was to make his own sandwiches, and his mom would let him. Willy was almost six-years old.

Willy’s mother would give him two big pieces of bread and some mayonnaise and willy would go at it. He made sandwiches that were tall and sandwiches that were tiny and small. There was no stopping him, because Willy liked to eat sandwiches. He would take those two pieces of bread and between those slices put anything he wanted to eat. And, his mom would let him.

He had cheese and lettuce and tomato and, if he could find it, even a little tempeh. Yet, what Willy liked best of all was to add a little pickle on top. In fact, Willy’s mom would sometimes even let him go with her to the Oryana co-op shopping. What Willy wanted to do was pick out the cucumbers which he used to make pickles, the larger the cucumber the better. Willy took the cucumbers home, added a little vinegar and maybe a tiny bit of salt, and then wait for those cucumbers turn into pickles. It took a few days, sometimes longer. And this is where this story gets interesting.

Willy went to school and had friends. And sometimes he heard stories, stories about cucumbers. And his ears picked up with the word cucumber and especially the word “pickle.” If someone was talking about pickles, Willy would listen real hard.
And then one day, he overheard someone talking about wild pickles. Now, Willy had never heard about wild pickles before, so he moved right over to where the kids were talking and squeezed right in next to his friend Bill. Willy listened up and this is what he heard.

Now, Michigan has lots of water, more fresh water than anywhere in the world. And, not far from where they lived were many lakes, marshes, and even a few swamps. Now, the swamps were where the best frogs were found and Willy loved frogs, which he learned about from his grandpa. Grandpa liked frogs so much, that whenever Willy went with his mom to the used thrift shops, and found an old rubber frog, he would beg his mom to buy it and give it to Grandpa.

Anyway, somewhere, not far from Traverse City were some very special swamps, swamps not like the other swamps people knew about. And there is one more thing you need to know about. The lower peninsula of Michigan is shaped like a big mitten with hundreds of lakes and water holes all over it. But underneath the whole of the Michigan mitten is one of the largest salt domes in the world, thirty-thousand trillion tons of salt. Now, that’s a lot of salt.

And, every once in a while some of that salt that is deep under the earth would bubble up into a few of these swamps, so that the water in those swamps, which was very fresh and clean, also already had some salt in, just exactly right for making pickles. And it just so happened that one of the largest salt swamps was outside the town of Traverse City, near where Willy lived.
And this is what Willy liked to hear best. In that one salt swamp, which was called Frog Swamp, there were pickles that just grew wild. Now, I didn’t say there were cucumbers there that turned into pickles. I said there were pickles there that were just naturally pickles. And the swamp was so wild and so friendly to growing things that some of these pickles got very big.

Willy only had seen pickle-sized pickles like you see in the grocery store. He had never seen pickles bigger than that. However, if he heard right, as he listened, they were saying that in Frog Swamp, pickles just kept on growing. And they grew so large that they were the size of human beings, even bigger. Willy had never seen one of these.

Of course, there were a lot of teeny pickles, small pickles, medium-sized pickles, larger pickles, and great big pickles. But willy had never heard of pickles the size of people or even larger. And Willy was not the only one who loved pickles, and some kids (and their parents) even went out to Frog Swamp to hunt the pickles and eat them raw or take them home, slice them up, and put them on sandwiches. By now, Willy was all ears. He had to go to Frog Swamp.

Yet, Willy also heard about the dangers of Frog Swamp, and he had to think about that. The biggest pickles sometimes broke off from the vines they grew on, but they kept on growing, right there in the salty swamp water. Not only that, but these really large pickles somehow learned to move, actually swim and get around. And these great pickles were not easy to spot and liked to hide out. They liked to be left alone. And, above all, these swamp pickles did not like to be
caught and certainly not ever eaten.

A large swamp pickle could swim underwater and suddenly jump right out of the water, high in the air, and fall back in with a great splash. If you stood at the edge of Frog Swamp and listened very carefully, you could hear these large splash sounds far out in the swamp. In fact, some townspeople would drive out to Frog Swamp, bring their folding chairs, and just sit at the edge of the swamp as the sun went down and listen to the great swamp pickles splashing way out there in the swamp.

Very few people were brave enough to actually go into the swamp because everybody knew that way out in the swamp was dangerous. It got deep far out in the swamp and the swamp pickles swam underwater and got very big. If a big swamp pickle hit you while you were walking in the swamp, it could knock you down and even run over you. And so, although people loved to sit in the evening on the edge of the swamp, very few of them ever went very far in there.

Now, there were some who did go in, mostly great big guys (and some girls) who wanted to hunt the swamp pickles, try to capture them, and drag them out of the swamp. Once in a great while, you would see a car on the road with a big swamp pickle tied on the top of the car. That was something to see! In the beginning, Willy had never seen a big swamp pickle, but he really wanted to.

More than any Christmas present, little Willy wanted to go out next summer and go into Frog Swamp and see for himself. And so, Willy asked his grandpa to take him to Frog Swamp, and grandpa said yes, next
summer. Willy couldn’t wait, and he got ready. And Willy’s mom helped him to buy some very tall swamp boots that came up to his hips. And his grandpa showed Willy how to make and use a lasso, a rope he would need to catch and capture swamp pickles. He would have to be older to do that, but grandpa could teach him how to get ready.

Now, everyone knew that Willy was too young to go out and deep into Frog Swamp himself; even Willy knew that. Willy was too young and had to wait until he was bigger and stronger. This took years and Willy was very patient and waited until he grew up. However, Willy and his grandpa talked about it every summer, and grandpa showed Willy how to rope a swamp pickle and pull it in. Willy would practice on an old tree stump in his back yard. He would rope that old stump again and again, until he got really good at it. Just the right number of years went by until Willy was a young man, and Willy never forgot about Frog Swamp and the great swamp pickles that lived there. He hoped the pickles were still there.

Then, Willy’s 18th birthday came up. Grandpa told Willy that now he was old enough to go into Frog Swamp and learn to hunt the pickles. Willy knew he was ready because he was big and strong and could take care of himself, even in Frog Swamp.

CALLING THE PICKLES

Over the years, more and more townspeople liked to drive out to Frog Swamp in the warm summer evenings, set up their folding lawn chairs at the edge of the swamp and watch the sun go down. They would talk, laugh, and a few of them even used to try
and call the swamp pickles, like you would make a bird call. The swamp pickles never answered those calls, but every few minutes you could hear a distant sound far out in the swamp as a big swamp pickle leaped out of the water, soared through the air, and came down with a big splash.

Now, not that many people had ever seen a big swamp pickle. Little ones? Sure. Everyone had seen (and eaten) some of those, but the really big pickles? Not so much. Every year or so there might be a picture of a giant swamp pickle in the newspaper, but that’s about it. Willy had not seen one, but he had ridden his bike out to the edge of Frog Swamp and sat with the old folks on the edge and listened to hear the big pickles splash far out in the swamp. But Willy had never been far out in that swamp or had even waded along the edges.

However, Willy had learned from the old folks how to call the big swamp pickles. They would use a conch-horn, a horn made from a large conch shell that, if you blew into it just right, would make a lovely deep moaning sound. Willy could do that and he had a pickle horn that he kept at home under his bed. Sometimes he would take the pickle horn out to the edge of the swamp and call the pickles. They never called back, but he could hear them splashing.

Just as you might think (and will was told), the huge swamp pickles looked just like giant pickles. They were dark green, wrinkled, and even smelled like pickles. How or why they moved around, no one knew, but they did move. You didn’t want to be standing in the swamp when a big pickle swam through; this Willy had also been told. They could
knock you right down and even pull you under by their wake as they swam by.

By the time he was eighteen, Willy had read everything he could find about the swamp pickles: books, magazines, and what very few videos that were ever made. Willy had them all on a little shelf in his room. No one around Traverse City knew more about swamp pickles than Willy, unless they were among the few who had ever actually gone into the swamp and hunted them. And they didn’t talk much.

Grandpa and Willy would drive out to Frog Swamp, put on their hip boots, leave their lunch in the car, and very slowly start to enter the swamp. At first, they just went a little ways, not too far. They could hear the pickles splashing far out in the swamp, but still could not see anything. Willy loved walking in the reeds and the water up to almost the top of his hip-boots, the sun on his face, and the warm breeze blowing through the swamp grass. Willy and grandpa did not bring any ropes to catch pickles, because they did not want to hurt them, but just watch.

Willy wanted to actually see a swamp pickle up close, but he did not want to scare or make the pickles upset or angry. Willy loved the big pickles, or at least he thought he did. He had never seen one... yet. Willy and grandpa went a little bit farther out each time they went into Frog Swamp. And, after a while, Willy and grandpa would come out of the swamp, spread a little blanket down on the edge of the grass and have their lunch. Those were some of the best times Willy and grandpa ever had, just sitting there, eating lunch, and listening for the splash of the big pickles far out in the swamp.
THE FIRST TIME

The first time Willy saw an actual swamp pickle was almost by accident. Willy and grandpa went farther and farther into the swamp most every trip. After a while, Grandpa would be tired and have to go back. And sometimes Willy would stay on and even go farther and farther out all by himself. All he could hear were the sound of his own boots moving through the reeds, so Willy liked to stop every minute or so and just stand there. He could feel the sun on his body, the breeze in his hair, and listen to the songs of the frogs (and some birds) all around him.

And so, one day, everything was so nice that Willy just kept walking deeper into the swamp, farther and farther. Willy lost track of time. He was just way out there. He must have been almost a mile from the car and the edge of the swamp. Even Willy was getting just a little tired and he looked for some place to rest. Sometimes there were hammocks, little islands of grass in the swamp, that you could rest in, or maybe the trunk of a large tree that had fallen in the swamp.

Willy saw what he thought of was a large rock sticking out of the water, He could perhaps rest on that. And as Willy moved through the water in his heavy boots toward the rock, the rock suddenly disappeared. It was just gone. Willy looked all around and there it was again, but it seemed a little farther away than he thought. How did he miss that? Willy again moved toward the rock. But this time he saw it clearly; the rock just went under the water and was gone.

And, as Willy stood there, suddenly in front of him the
rock exploded out of the water, wriggling high through the air, and coming down with a huge splash, all over Willy. And as willy stood there, soaked to the skin, the huge swamp pickle just swam away under water, parting the reeds with its waves.

Willy stood there, silent. There were no sounds now, just the sun beating away, and a few birds calling. Willy had seen a swamp pickle all by himself, although not for very long. And Wiley waited, hoping the pickle would come to the surface or return, but almost afraid of what he would do if it did. It was a little scary, but mostly wonderful.

After a while, Willy slowly made his way back to the car. It must have taken him at least an hour, but Grandpa was there waiting for him. Grandpa could see the great smile on Willy’s face and he knew that Willy had seen a swamp pickle. Grandpa was so glad. And they sat by the edge of the swamp, ate their lunch, and talked together for a long, long time.

[TO BE CONTINUED]