

The Fishing Trio

A Prequel to the Episode 'Snakebite' written by Carroll Christensen

Icabu

Station 51's A-shift drifted from the stationhouse, through the parking lot on the way to their respective vehicles. It was the start of a four-day off cycle. There was a breezy camaraderie as the crew departed for their time away from serving the citizens of LA County.

"So you three are really going fishing together for the entire four days." Hank didn't phrase it as a question, but he held the question in his eyes.

"Sure," Roy shrugged. "The brochures for the lake really looked nice. Lots of peace and quiet, fresh air, and the company isn't that bad." Roy added the last part as an answer to Hank's unspoken question.

Johnny and Chet walked up to Roy and Hank. "I'll pick you up around noon," Johnny advised Roy, then he turned to Chet. "Then we'll swing by and get you, so be ready."

"I'll be ready, Gage. You just make sure you aren't late." Chet nodded to Roy and Hank, got into his station wagon and roared off.

"I won't be late," Johnny yelled at the retreating wagon. A pall of burnt oil hung in a blue haze behind the aged vehicle.

Johnny got into his Rover and backed around Roy and Hank. "See you at noon." At Roy's nod he selected first gear and popped the clutch. A grin spread across his face as the tough little engine barked the rear tires.

Hank shook his head at John's adolescent departure. He turned to face Roy. "How do you get away with going fishing for four days with those guys? I'm facing a 'honey-do' list that I probably couldn't finish with four months off."

Roy laughed. "Joanne is taking the kids to her parents. She was actually relieved that I'm going with Johnny and Chet and not moping around at my in-laws."

"Aahh," Hank nodded. "Good plan. Well, you guys have fun, be careful, and don't bring back any fish." He waved at Marco, then Mike, as they passed on their way out of the parking lot.

"Thanks, Cap." Roy used the familiar title unconsciously. "And don't worry, we rarely catch enough fish to bring any back."

Now, only the cars and trucks belonging to B-shift remained in the parking lot.

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"Two fishing poles, Gage?" Chet asked skeptically. "How can you fish with two poles? You expecting to break one and need a backup?"

"Chet, shut up and I'll explain how a real fisherman operates," Johnny said with a sly grin.

“Oh, this I gotta hear.” Chet crossed his arms and stood solemnly, waiting for Gage’s sage advice.

“This one,” Johnny indicated his open-faced reel on a light action six-foot rod, “is for worm fishing. It’ll just hang over the side until it attracts a fish. Now this,” Johnny indicated a shiny new baitcast reel on a medium action six and a half foot rod. “This baby is for casting spinner bait. All the tournament pros use these now.”

Chet looked at his beat up old Zebco combo special that he’d had since he was twelve. He squinted in the bright sun light at Gage. “I bet I catch more fish than you and all that fancy gear.” He turned and headed for the canoe.

Johnny blinked, started to say something, then just shook his head. He gathered his gear and followed Chet to their rented boat.

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The three off-duty firefighters sat in a seventeen-foot aluminum canoe on a pristine lake in Nevada. For the next four days they would fish, camp, and generally enjoy the great outdoors. At least those were the thoughts at the outset of this trip.

Roy let the rays of the late afternoon sun warm him. They had settled into a quiet rhythm of casting and retrieving. The gentle rocking and the quiet sloshing sound of wavelets slapping the sides of the boat, not to mention a general weariness, threatened to lull him to sleep. Roy’s head snapped back from a brief doze. He rubbed his hands over his face and looked up to see Johnny grinning at him. *Busted...* He grinned back at his partner; glad Johnny didn’t tease him about nodding off.

Roy took in the unfamiliar surroundings. It was a nice size lake. They were relatively close to the shore on his left. He saw a man up to his waist in the lake fishing while his wife, Roy guessed, sat on the shore in a lawn chair reading a book. *At least they’re together...* He couldn’t help thinking about Joanne and the kids.

The boat lurched, knocking Roy out of his reverie. He grabbed the sides of the boat to steady himself.

“What the...” Johnny began, then saw Chet standing up in the bow of the canoe. “For crying out loud, Chet, sit down!” Johnny’s mouth flew open when he saw Chet’s fishing pole bend towards the water.

“I’ve got one!” Chet exclaimed excitedly. He struggled with his fishing pole; it lunged towards the water again, nearly pulling Chet in too. “It feels like a whopper.”

Roy noticed the boat drifting, or being pulled, towards shore. He glanced at the fisherman he saw standing in the water earlier. The man was waving frantically at them. Roy had to grab Johnny’s arm to get his attention away from Chet and his ‘catch’. “I think we may have a problem here.”

Johnny looked around. “What?”

“Watch that guy fishing over there. Watch closely.”

Johnny sat down. “Oh, man,” he groaned. He watched as the man hauled back on his fly rod and Chet’s rod pulled hard towards the water. Then Chet yanked back on his rod and the man’s fly rod stretched towards them.

“Chet!” Johnny yelled. “Stop. You’re hooked on that guy’s line.”

Chet paused in his efforts, giving Johnny a spiteful look. “I am not. It’s a fish. I can feel it wiggling.”

Johnny paddled the canoe closer to the fly fisherman. Chet reeled in his line as they closed the short distance. A large lake trout appeared at the end of Chet’s line.

“See. I told you.” Chet’s eyes were wide with wonder at the sizeable catch. “What a beaut.”

Chet let out an audible groan when he pulled the fish to the side of the boat. His hook had snagged the fish at the tail. A delicate chartreuse Woolly Bugger fly was attached to the corner of the fish’s mouth; the attached line led straight to the man standing in the water scowling at them. Chet lipped the fish out of the water, removed his hook, and then slipped the fly from its mouth. He took a moment to admire the beauty of the lake trout; its silvery skin gleamed a rainbow of color in the sun. Reluctantly, Chet stretched the fish out to the fly fisherman, who waded out chest deep to meet their boat. The trout flipped its tail, jerking out of Chet’s grasp, and splashed into the water between the boat and the fly fisherman.

“Look what you’ve done, you...you klutz,” the fly fisherman yelled at Chet.

Chet wasn’t all that sorry the fish got away. “Sorry, man. Better luck next time.”

Johnny readied his paddle as the man in the water glared at Chet. “Sit down, Chet. We’ll head back and set up camp.

Chet slumped back in his seat. “I knew I should’ve brought my fly rod,” he stated in disgust. He removed his hat and adjusted the array of flies on the hook patch. He fingered the dark Woolly Bugger that he had tied himself last week, imagining a large lake trout fighting and stretching his line.

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Johnny realized the mistake at having his tent ‘in the shop’ getting the seams sealed. This rented four-man tent wasn’t nearly as nice. Also, it was resisting their best efforts at erecting it.

“That doesn’t go there, Chet.” Johnny spread the tent poles, stakes, and ropes on the flattest spot at their chosen campsite. It wasn’t very flat, but it would have to do.

“No, Chet, that pole goes over there. On the corner over there,” Johnny directed. “Okay. Now pass that pole through these loops here. Gently, gently. Stop! Chet, stop! You’re going to rip it.”

Chet retrieved the pole and threw it down at Johnny’s feet. “Since I can’t do this right, you can do it all yourself!”

“Calm down, Chet,” Johnny soothed. “Help me get this up before it gets dark.”

Chet took a couple of deep, calming breaths. “Okay,” he agreed. “But only if you quit yelling and bossing. You don’t know how to put this thing up any more than me.”

Johnny took a couple of deep breaths too. “Okay, Chet. Truce.”

It was only a half hour after sunset when the tent was finally erected in its proper configuration. Roy had gathered a large pile of firewood by then, but it was too warm for a fire, so the trio went in search of nourishment.

Chet walked over to where Johnny was digging through the supplies in the back of the Rover. "I thought we'd be eating fish..." he started.

Roy's stomach growled audibly. "We do have extra food, don't we?"

Johnny pulled out a heavy, well worn cooler and opened it. "Of course we have food," Johnny stepped back as the other two dug into the treasure chest. "You don't think I'd rely on Chet's fishing prowess to feed me, do ya?"

"I came closer to catching a fish than you did, Gage," Chet grouched as he tore open a bag of chips.

"This isn't horseshoes so close doesn't count." Johnny smiled as Chet bristled at the barb.

The trio sat in the glow of the Coleman lantern, munching cold cut subs, passing the bag of potato chips, and sipping cold ones.

Soon after eating, all three were ready to turn in. They ducked into the tent. Their three sleeping bags completely covered the floor. They would be stacked in there like cord wood.

Roy looked around in the dim light. "This is supposed to be a four man tent, isn't it?" He wasn't asking anyone in particular; it just slipped out.

Chet snorted. "Yeah. If you're Snoozy, Dopey, Grumpy, or Dizzy."

"What...?" Johnny voiced.

"You know," Chet explained. "Those little munchkin guys."

Roy laughed out loud. "Do you mean the Seven Dwarfs?"

"Yeah, that's them."

"Well, it's Sleepy not Snoozy. And none of them were named Dizzy," Roy explained.

"I think we're all dizzy for coming on this trip." Chet scooted into his sleeping bag.

"Shut up, Chet." Johnny growled from his sleeping bag.

"Good night guys," Roy added.

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The trio was on the lake just after sunrise to start their second day. Johnny paddled the trio over to the far shore. The lake's surface was smooth as glass so it was easy going. After four hours without even a nibble, Johnny grounded the canoe on the rocky shore. They tumbled out of the canoe, stretching cramped muscles and stiff joints.

After visiting the bushes and a round of sandwiches, the guys set out once again. Johnny hugged the shoreline, fishing some weed beds and flooded timber. Another two hours passed without even a hint of a fish.

“Hey!” exclaimed Chet. “I got something!” He wasn't going to let this one get away.

The wrestle was brief. Soon, Chet was in the water, his hook imbedded in a submerged log. Johnny and Roy were doubled over with laughter in the canoe. Chet grabbed the side to hoist himself back in the boat. Johnny and Roy didn't have a chance. The canoe flipped with Chet's weight hanging on the side. Now Chet laughed.

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“Cool fire, Roy,” commented Chet. He got up and put more baked beans on his tin camping plate.

“Thanks, Chet. It just isn't camping unless you have a fire. Anyway, it gives us a warm dinner.” Roy chomped on his hot dog.

“Hey, Gage. You gonna eat, or can I have your beans too?” Chet bellowed across the fire.

“I'm comin'. Keep your mitts off my food.” Johnny reluctantly set down his hopelessly tangled baitcasting reel and picked up his plate and utensils.

After enjoying a couple of hot dogs and a meager helping of baked beans, Johnny took the dishes down to the lake to clean them. There was a noticeable breeze away from the shelter of the woods, and the lake was choppy; the waves lapped at the shore. Johnny finished quickly and hurried back to camp.

“I think a storm is brewing guys,” Johnny announced as he put the dishes away. “We had better batten down...”

A blinding bolt of lightning flashed above the firefighters and the immediate clap of thunder shook them. They scurried to get everything ready for the impending storm. They stayed by the fire until the sky opened and a deluge spewed forth. The downpour soaked them as they dove into the tent, a tangled mass of arms and legs in their haste to escape a second drenching.

“Get your foot off my neck, you twit.” Johnny angrily shoved Chet's foot away from his larynx.

“Only if you get your bony knee out of my stomach.” Chet squirmed to get off the offending patella. At the same time, Johnny leaned over to release Roy's right arm. “Ooof. Keep it up Gage, and you'll be wearing my dinner.”

The untangled trio sat grumpily in the confining tent, listening to the storm rage around them. Twigs bounced off the canvas covering them. The rain came in waves, blown with an angry wind that threatened to uproot the small tent. The flashes of lightening increased their frequency; the accompanying booming thunder shook the ground, the air, and their wits.

“It’s really coming down out there,” Roy announced to the group.

“Uh, I hadn’t noticed, Roy.” Chet’s sarcastic reply was met with silence from inside the tent. An angry blast of wind and rain, accompanied by several bright flashes and briefly delayed earth shaking booms answered from outside.

Chet eyed their flimsy shelter warily. “Okay, already! I noticed. Boy, did I ever notice.”

“Don’t mess with Mother Nature, Chet,” Johnny said with a grin.

The flashing lightning created a strobe effect inside the tent. Each other’s movements jerked in front of their eyes like a really old movie, or those hand-drawn paper fan movies made in grade school.

The firefighters dozed through the storm; startled into wakefulness at the close, bone-rattling thunder claps. Chet swatted at something hitting his head and groaned when his hand met a wet spot in his hair. He scooted deeper into his sleeping bag, his elbow eliciting a groan from Roy. The drip...drip...drip threatened to drive Chet insane.

The soggy soil released its grip on several of the tent stakes from the incessant pull of the storm strained tent ropes. The heavy, wet canvas collapsed on the trio it harbored. “Get in the truck,” Johnny yelled in the darkness, loud enough to be heard over Chet’s cursing.

The trio clambered into the Rover. They were damp, tired, and basically miserable. Chet made sure they knew exactly how miserable he was. Roy agreed, though silently. Johnny argued with Chet that it wasn’t that bad, a little rain never hurt anyone. They settled down finally and dozed in the truck; Johnny and Roy in the front, Chet sprawled in the back. The storm blew itself out and peace returned to the lake and forest.

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“I think we have a problem, Gage.” Chet, fishing pole in hand, jogged back to the wrecked campsite as the sun peeked over the lake’s horizon to start their third day.

“What do you mean?” Johnny asked, looking up from tightening one of the tent ropes.

“The boat is gone. Nowhere to be seen.” Chet shrugged as Johnny eyed him incredulously. “The storm must have ripped it free. I walked up and down the shore and didn’t see it.”

“That’s just great!” Johnny exploded, throwing down the hammer he used to anchor the tent stakes.

“Calm down, Johnny,” Roy soothed. “From the looks of things, the storm came out of the northwest. We’ll just go around to the southeast area of the lake and we should find the boat. The wind would have pushed it that way.”

Johnny rubbed his chin; the whiskers started to itch. “Yeah. I see what you mean. Great idea, Roy.”

“Yeah, Roy. Maybe that’s where the fish are, too,” Chet piped. “We sure could use some divine intervention in that department.”

Johnny tore down the recently re-erected tent and they packed everything back in the Rover. Johnny double-checked the front hubs to make sure four-wheel drive would be available immediately, if needed. They headed down a pair of overgrown, somewhat parallel ruts that passed for a road.

“Damn, Gage. Can’t you miss some of the holes?” Chet rubbed his head where it had impacted with the roof of the Rover, again.

“I’m missing most of them. There isn’t much road left between the holes.” He jerked the wheel in time to miss a crater, but hit three large holes in quick succession. “Sorry, guys.”

Roy clung to any handhold within reach. Chet bounced onto the floor in the back; resigning, he stayed there.

The Rover topped over a steep hill. “Shit!” Johnny exclaimed as he put the clutch to the floor and pumped the brake pedal. It didn’t help; gravity and the muddy slope took over. Roy braced both hands against the dash. Chet peeked over Roy’s shoulder. His eyes went wide as he saw the lake-sized mud puddle at the bottom of the steep incline, which they were sliding towards. Chet sank back to the floor and put his head between his knees with his hands covering his head, in the classic ‘crash’ position.

Johnny sawed at the wheel to keep them from sliding sideways. He grabbed the four-wheel drive lever and slammed it into LOW. He then shifted into first gear and readied for impact. Their best chance would be to power through the quagmire before sinking too deeply. Brown water splashed over the windshield as the Rover hit the mud puddle head on; it was about floorboard deep. Johnny eased off the clutch and put power to the wheels. He watched the tach closely, keeping it just under the red line. *Come on, baby...You can do it...Halfway there now...Just a little farther...* Johnny kept a mental dialogue with the Rover, wishing it through the mud hole. He saw Roy relax his grip on the dash a little as they plowed onward.

It almost worked. Just shy of the far edge of the expanse of mud, a submerged rock or log bounced the truck. The tires lost contact with the tenuous grip they had managed thus far in the mud. The axles sank into the muck. The tires continued turning, but without any traction to propel the truck forward.

“Damn!” Johnny despaired. He kept the RPMs up to keep positive pressure through the exhaust system. He felt sure the tailpipe was under water. He looked over at Roy.

Roy rolled his eyes and sighed. “Come on, Chet. Looks like we get to push.” He knew Chet would lay it on thick for this, but Roy was somewhat impressed that Johnny had gotten them this far through the mess. The idea of getting out in the mud didn’t appeal to him much either, but it beat sitting here arguing about it.

Chet climbed out after Roy, ominously quiet. He shot Roy a disgruntled look as the pair waded in the thigh deep muddy water. There were several large rocks, at least that’s what they felt like, for Roy and Chet to use for leverage as they pushed.

“Hey, Johnny,” Roy called from behind the driver’s side.

“Yeah.” Johnny waved at him out the window.

“On three, okay?”

“Okay.”

“One. Two.” There was a pause as Roy shouldered into the truck, then glanced over to make sure Chet was also ready. “Three!”

Johnny let the clutch out slowly, and applied power equally slowly. Behind him, Roy and Chet’s faces twisted with their efforts to move the stuck truck. Plumes of mud, water, and gravel sprayed from all four tires. Roy and Chet began a rocking, push and release, push and release method. They were about to give up when the truck finally moved – sideways. Roy and Chet stepped back to watch.

Johnny felt the truck start its sideways march through the mud. He quickly turned the wheels into the direction of the slide and pressed harder on the gas pedal. Movement was movement, and he was grateful for any Roy and Chet could get him. He didn’t want to waste their efforts.

Chet slogged over to Roy as Johnny manipulated the Rover. The sideways movement stopped suddenly and the truck lurched forward, finding a spot of traction. They could see Johnny through the driver’s window as he straightened the tires, feathered the power, and drove up on firmer soil.

Chet shook his head and looked at Roy. “It looks like he’s done this before.” Chet snorted a laugh at Roy’s mud splattered front, head to toe.

Roy wiped mud out of his eye, shook it out of his hair. “I think you’re right about that.” Roy picked a couple of large mud clumps from Chet’s hair. *But not with me again...* The mud covered pair trudged over to the idling truck.

“Thanks, guys...” Johnny cut his greeting short when he saw Chet crawl in and sit down, mud and all. Roy jumped into the passenger seat, dripping a few clumps of mud onto the floorboard.

“You’re welcome,” the muddy pair said in unison.

Johnny hid his smile and took off down the bumpy, rutted road again.

“Well?” Johnny asked, shading his eyes as he scanned the horizon.

“Nothing,” Roy answered, dropping wearily into his camp chair. “Chet back yet?”

“Nope. Let’s get this fire started, the smoke may lead Chet back here.” *I bet he’s lost...*

“That’s a good idea. The wood is still damp from the storm. It’ll probably smoke quite a bit.” Roy gathered up a newspaper they had packed around something and wadded up the pages and stuffed them around the damp wood.

“What do you think they’ll charge for losing a boat?” Johnny inquired.

Roy shrugged. "It was an act of nature. Maybe they won't charge anything." He didn't want Johnny to start obsessing about this.

"Maybe." Johnny didn't sound very convinced. He put the bucket back that he'd used to rinse as much mud off the Rover as possible and grabbed a few extra tent stakes.

Roy fanned the fire to life. Thick white smoke rolled up from the fire ring. He added a couple of bigger pieces of wood as the kindling burned steadily. Soon, orange flames could be seen flickering through the dense smoke.

Johnny looked up from pounding in the last tent stake. He heard something in the woods off to his left. He hefted the hammer in his hand, ready for anything.

Chet cleared the last of the trees and scrub brush, eyeing their tent and the smoky fire. "Hey, guys!" he called.

Johnny lowered the hammer. "Hey, Chet. Did you find the boat?"

"No," he answered disgustedly. "But I did manage to tear my favorite shirt and get my feet soaked." He headed over to the fire to dry his feet.

Johnny sighed, looked out over the lake. It was getting too dark to continue searching. They had searched all afternoon, by foot and in the Rover. They had found nothing. It was like the storm ate the boat. He stowed the hammer in the back of the Rover.

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Chet coughed as a wind shift drifted the smoke over him. He shuffled his chair around to fresh air. Roy soon followed him. Johnny leaned against his Rover, away from the dense smoke, but a haze hung in the air around him. There was another wind shift, a couple of coughs, the shuffling of chairs.

*Man, I've eaten enough smoke to be at a three-alarm warehouse fire instead of a camping trip...* Chet despaired as he shuffled his chair into fresh air once again.

Roy scooted his camp chair out of the drifting smoke one more time, also. The leg of the chair caught on a rock and as Roy settled his weight into the chair, it pitched backwards. "Aaarghh!" Arms and legs flailing, Roy went over backwards into the rough stones. The chair leg buckled under the pivot pressure, leaving Roy no recourse but to sit in the rocks.

"You okay, Roy?" Chet reached for Roy's arm to help him up. Roy brushed his arm away and laughed hysterically, remaining seated in the rocks. Chet stood, hands on hips, staring oddly at the senior paramedic.

"Roy? You okay?" Johnny glanced at Chet, then back to his laughing partner. *What the...*

Roy finally got himself under control. He wiped the laugh tears from his eyes. "I'm okay, guys. This is just the icing on the cake."

Chet was laughing now. "You did put on a pretty good show there." Roy took his proffered hand up this time.

John just looked at the two of them. *There must be something in that smoke...*

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“It would’ve been nice if that old guy had told us he had already gathered up the boats that the storm tore loose,” Johnny grouched as he turned the Rover onto the paved road; the road home. He turned to Roy beside him. “It was right where you said it’d be.”

Roy just nodded and turned to stare out his window at the brown hills. The dark green bushes that dotted their surface held his attention as he mentally connected them in a myriad of patterns.

“Would’ve been nice if he’d warned us of those storms when we signed in,” Chet mumbled from the back. He reached in a box and pulled out Gage’s tangled baitcasting reel. He proceeded to either remedy the problem or compound it; only time would tell which.

“But it was nice of him to let us use the shower facilities.” *The trip back will now be much more tolerable...* Johnny rubbed his now smooth chin.

“Yeah, Gage. That was the best buck-fifty you’ve spent in a while.” Chet held his nose to accentuate his point.

“Yeah, well, he probably shoulda charged you double,” Johnny spat back.

“I think it was self defense,” Roy mumbled out his window. *Joanne, I can’t wait to curl up in our warm bed tonight...*

A heavy silence blanketed the occupants of the Rover as it topped a rise, a straight ribbon of pavement ahead.

“All right, so we didn’t catch many fish,” Johnny glanced at Roy.

Roy took his eyes off the hillside. “Any fish, remember? Any fish.” He shot back at Johnny.

“Well, it was still good to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city for four days.” Johnny tried lightening the heavy mood.

“Boring...” Chet mumbled from behind Johnny and Roy.

“Boring?” Johnny craned his head to see Chet. “What do you mean, boring?”

“I guess what he means is that we all know we had a lousy time when we got tired of sitting across the campfire and choking on the smoke.” Roy gushed in a single breath.

Johnny’s brow furrowed in irritation. “Now wait a minute. Don’t blame the smoke on me.” *That was all you and Chet...*

“Look, you don’t have to get so defensive just because this ridiculous trip was your idea,” Chet piped from the back of the Rover as it rounded a curve. “You know, with your brain capacity, uh...”

The sun glistening from a stationary windshield ahead caught John's attention. "Wait a minute. Hold it, hold it."

"Ah, don't change the subject..." Chet objected.

"Up ahead." Johnny stared ahead.

Roy now followed his partner's gaze, catching sight of the oddly placed vehicles in the road ahead.

"Come on..." Chet finally looked over Roy's shoulder and all arguments ended.

"First aid kit," Roy commanded to Chet. Chet already had it in his hand.

John braked the Rover to a stop just behind the station wagon that hit head on with a pickup truck.

The trio flew out and sprinted for the wrecked vehicles. "I'll take the truck," John called as he ran past the station wagon. Chet began pulling battery cables and setting flares. Roy jumped into the back seat of the station wagon, a young boy's life in his hands.

Vacation was officially over. The trio turned to serve the citizens of whatever county they were in.

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