



Shoe # 40

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Age: 12+

One day, fifth-grader Paul Fifth receives an agitated message from Hugo “the Shoeman” Bachmann, whose secret the boy tracked down in a previous book- Shoe # 39. Paul learns that the man’s girlfriend, the beautiful shoe saleswoman Katya, has started to complain of boredom and wants to go on a canoe trip. Since Hugo has very little experience in that area, he’d like for Paul to come along for support. The boy gladly agrees, especially when he’s allowed to invite his best friend Minna. As they paddle across beautiful Grove Lake, the children notice quite a few peculiarities and after Hugo Bachmann is unjustly fined for illegal fishing, Paul decides to get to the bottom of things.



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8.

Hugo was lounging in front of the tent. Katya, Minna, and Paul had gone off fishing. They'd tried to get Hugo to come along, but he resolutely declined. Fishing seemed pointless—soaking a worm in the water while you stare dully at a cork bobbing on the surface. Watching the sun slowly sink behind the tall pine trees as day turned to night was another thing entirely.

Suddenly, he heard voices nearby. Hugo sat up and spotted two men in the brush. Both were carrying fishing poles. They stopped when they came to the tent. Hugo stood up and said hello. For a few moments, the men just stared at him soundlessly. The older one was tall, burly, bald, and bearded. The younger one was scrawny and a head's length shorter, his long hair tied back in a ponytail.

"Hi! Where're you from?" the bald one finally asked.

"Tallinn," Hugo replied.

"Tallinn?" the younger man echoed, as if doubting his answer. "And you came all the way here on that?" He nodded towards the canoe pulled up onto the bank.

Hugo nodded.

"Yep, that's right."

The bald man peered across the lake, where Katya, Minna, and Paul's canoe was visible.

"Putting nets out for the night, are we?" he asked, giving Hugo an unexpected wink.

What nets? The man was starting to seem suspicious. Neither one inspired any sense of trust, to be honest. Hugo didn't know what to answer.

"Oh, don't you worry," the younger one chuckled. "We're not going to tattle. Just here to catch ourselves a couple pikes and skedaddle."

He pulled a half-finished plastic bottle of beer out of his coat pocket, unscrewed it, guzzled the rest, and released a long burp.

"Want some recycling money?" he asked, tossing the empty bottle before Hugo's feet. "I'm sure you could use the ten-cent return."

"Alright dude, we're not going to bother you anymore," the older man said as he started to leave, to Hugo's relief. "Hope you're not going to go and tell on us."

Hugo was baffled by everything the men were saying.

"What do you mean, 'tell on you'?" he worked up the courage to ask.

The ponytailed man howled in laughter.

"Exactly," he giggled, tapping a finger against his temple.

"Come on!" the bald man called back.

The ponytailed man then turned and walked away.

"All kinds of bums slumming around here, ain't there," he grunted to his friend.

Hugo leaned down, picked up the empty beer bottle, and frowned as he stared at the men until they were out of sight. Bums? Did they mean him? He suddenly realized that given his current appearance, he might look pretty sleazy. But those guys themselves were sleazy! What nets were they talking about? Who should he have to tell on? How had they gotten here, anyway? Hugo decided to take a look around the campsite. A narrow dirt road wound through the woods to the lake, and parked on the shoulder was a beaten-up black BMW that probably belonged to the men. Leaning against a tree next to it was also an old bicycle with a big basket tied to the cargo rack. One of them must have driven and the other biked.

Hugo felt a nasty wave of anxiety wash over him. Instead of just relaxing by a lake in the woods, he now couldn't get that tandem of random guys out of his head. He walked back to the shore. Their other canoe was wedged between the reeds on the far side of the lake. The evening air was so still that he could occasionally hear Minna, Katya, and Paul's voices float across the water. Hugo then spotted another boat just to the left of the canoe. Someone else was on the lake. He hurried back to the tent and rummaged through his bag for a pair of binoculars. Seated in the boat was a lone fisherman. Grove Lake was apparently quite the popular spot. It was a good thing he hadn't gone along with the others and left the tent unattended. Best not to find out what guys

like the ones who'd walked past the campsite might do, otherwise. Hugo ambled along the shore, picking up pinecones here and there and tossing them into the water.

"Hey! Shh! Stop it, you'll scare away the fish!"

Hugo jumped. He was surprised to find he'd stumbled across the ponytailed man, who was standing in the shade of a stocky pine and casting. Hugo meant to skedaddle, but noticed a huge pike lying on the ground next to the fisherman. Were there really such plump fish swimming around the lake?

"You caught a fish that big?!" he marveled.

The long-haired man reeled in his line and glanced down.

"Ah, that's nothing. Just a scrawny pike-punk," he said with a shrug.

"Well, I think it's pretty massive," Hugo complemented. "I've never caught a fish in my life."

This caused the man to stare at Hugo for a few long moments.

"Not one? That really true?"

Hugo nodded. The man grinned and a kind look flashed in his eyes.

"How've you gotten to be so old without fishing? Want to give it a try?"

It would've been impolite to turn down the unexpected offer.

"What's your name?"

“Hugo.”

“Hugo? That’s awesome! Hugo Boss!” the ponytailed man laughed. “I’m Seppinen, but people just call me Seppy. Alright, let’s show Hugo Boss how to catch big fish with a spinner.”

Seppy demonstrated how to flip the bail back while holding the line down with your finger to keep it from spooling off. Then, you swung the pole back over your shoulder and let the bait soar with a strong cast. Seppy was a skilled fisherman and his spinner flew far before plopping into the lake. Next, you steadily reeled it back in. Seppy handed the pole to Hugo. He had a bit of trouble at first—the line got stuck, then the spinner flew into a bush—but his teacher was determined and wouldn’t let him give up. It appeared he really did want to make Hugo a master caster! Slowly but surely, the boy started to get a hang of it. He even had a spectacular couple of casts. Hugo was feeling better and the sense of unease had gone away, too.

“Where’s your buddy?” he asked Seppy

“Catfish? I reckon he’s taking a nap in the car; wasn’t feeling up to snuff. Party got a little wild last night, yep.”

Hugo didn’t ask for any more details, just in case. He took the stance Seppy had taught him and cast the lure into the water.

“Would you look at that! Didn’t take me half an hour to turn you into a proper fisherman!” Seppy boasted.

Another vehicle rumbled out of the woods and pulled up next to the campsite—a gray jeep pickup. A man in camouflage gear stepped out, looked around, and started heading towards Seppy and Hugo. Seppy kept peeking back over his shoulder.

“Hey, Hugo,” he said softly. “You keep casting away; I’m going to go get us a couple new spinners from the car. Looks like the pike’s not biting this silver one—we’ll try something more snazzy.”

Seppy didn’t walk straight towards his car, however, but disappeared into the bushes. Hugo carried on alone. He tried to repeat his casts exactly how Seppy had taught him, but the lure dropped close to the bank on the very first try and got caught on something. Hugo jerked the pole this way and that, but it was stuck fast. It would be an awful shame to lose a stranger’s spinner! He had no choice but to wade into the water and get it loose.

Hugo thought for a moment. Taking off his shoes wouldn’t be a good idea, because who knew what shards of glass and sharp-ended sticks might be buried in the mud. So, he rolled his pants up to his knees and stepped cautiously into the water. It was hard going, but he managed to get all the way to the spinner. It’d gotten caught behind a submerged branch. Hugo worked it free and turned around to squelch his way back to shore. The stranger who had just driven up was standing there and waiting.

“Hello! Raul Ottoson, environmental inspector.”

“Hi there! I’m Hugo Bachmann, nice to meet you. How can I be of service?”

Hugo tried to wade quickly back to the bank, but his feet had sunk deep into the oozy lakebed while standing in place and wouldn’t budge. Fists pressed against his hips, the man stood watching Hugo struggle.

“I see you’ve been catching pike here?”

“Sorry to say I haven’t—that’s not mine,” Hugo explained. He pulled at one leg with all his might and finally got it free, but his shoe stayed embedded in the mud. Hugo sloshed his hands through the water searching for the shoe, but all he could find was sticky sludge.

“How ‘bout you come out now?” Raul Ottoson said in an unexpectedly stern voice.

“Just a minute! I lost my shoe, okay?” Hugo mumbled. He was annoyed that some stranger was just hanging around there, giving orders. Why should he care what I’m doing in the water? Hugo wondered. Alas, he failed to find the shoe, so the boy gave up and waded back to shore.

The man had meanwhile taken out a measuring tape and was measuring the pike on the ground. Hugo squatted down curiously beside him.

“How long is it?”

“Thirty-eight centimeters from tip to tail-fin.”

“Whoa, that’s a whopper!” Hugo gasped.

The environmental inspector straightened up and gave Hugo a sharp glare.

“There’s no use playing games here. You’ve caught an undersized specimen, seven centimeters short.”

“Oh, really? Well, sorry to tell you, but I wasn’t the one who caught it.”

“That’s what they all say. Have you paid your amateur fishing license fee?”

“License?” Hugo asked, confused.

“Don’t be smart with me!”

Now the inspector was visibly irritated.

“Your amateur fishing license for fishing with a spinner.”

“Oh, really? I honestly didn’t know what you meant,” Hugo said, laughing in relief. “But that’s not my spinner and I’ve never even caught a fish, you know. There’s been another guy fishing here and I just happened to walk past.”

“And where’s this ‘other guy’ of yours, then?” Raul Ottoson asked, peering from side to side.

“He’ll be right back. He went to get another lure from his car.”

“What car?”

“From that black BMW,” Hugo said, pointing towards the woods.

“That black BMW drove away not two minutes ago.”

Hugo frowned.

“No way. Seppy said that Catfish was sleeping in the car and asked me to wait here while he brought back new lures.”

“Looks like you’re pretty chummy with this ‘Catfish’ and ‘Seppy’.”

Raul Ottoson’s tone was oozing with sarcasm. Hugo did his best to explain that he’d never seen the two men before; that he’d never had anything to do with them until now. The inspector wasn’t satisfied. He picked up the pike and ordered Hugo to come with him. The black BMW was gone—that much was clear. Seppy and Catfish really were unsavory fellows, scurrying off so secretively and even leaving behind their fishing equipment. That meant they were fishing illegally and hightailed it as soon as the environmental inspector showed up. But knowing that now was of no help to Hugo. On the contrary—Raul Ottoson refused to believe his excuses. He was convinced that the boy was lying and trying to shift the blame to his accomplices. It all ended with the inspector confiscating the pole and the illegal pike, then filling out a citation for the serious violation of fishing laws.

“You can count on a fine of up to four hundred euros,” Raul Ottoson declared. He made Hugo sign the form, said a polite and chilly goodbye, then got into his car and drove away. Hugo stood dumbstruck in the middle of the campsite. What an unbelievable injustice! Although he was totally

innocent, Hugo was clutching a citation accusing him of several serious violations. The size of the possible fine didn’t matter as much as the fact that he’d been officially declared a poacher—a criminal! He’d simply wandered into the wrong place at the wrong time and was now up to his ears in trouble.

Only then did Hugo notice that his pants were wet up to the knees and his right shoe was missing. At that moment, Katya, Minna, and Paul returned from fishing. They steered their canoe towards the bank and waved cheerfully to their friend on the shore. Still clutching the citation, Hugo lifted his arm above his head and waved absentmindedly. From a distance, it looked like a white flag waving in surrender.

9.

The sky had grown dark. Katya, Hugo, Minna, and Paul were sitting around the campfire and roasting hot dogs on sticks. All except for Hugo, that is. He was leaning against the trunk of a pine and staring at the flames in silence. Paul raised his stick up to his mouth, blew on the hot dog, and tried biting into it.

“Not bad. Almost ready.”

No one said a thing. Everyone’s mood had been dampened by what happened to Hugo.

Katya shifted closer to him and rested her head on the boy’s shoulder.

“It’s so stupid that everything’s gone this

way. I was hoping we'd have a nice romantic evening and now, some dumb criminals have gone and ruined it."

"I'd report it to the police, in any case. I wouldn't just leave it at that," Paul repeated. "It makes no sense to pay some fine for absolutely no reason."

Hugo looked up.

"But how can I prove I'm not guilty? The inspector caught me red-handed. I was holding a fishing pole and there was a fish lying on the ground right next to me. Those two guys will just laugh in my face, even if the police do catch them."

Hugo was right—it would be very hard to prove his innocence.

Minna stood up resolutely.

"Hey, guys—this isn't right! I think the best thing would be for us to simply put the whole thing out of our minds for now. Let's eat, okay? There'll be no fish soup tonight, but we can still clean them and fry them in the campfire."

Hugo's friends had caught four perch and five short roach. Katya, who'd fished for the first time ever, was especially pleased with her catch. She would've liked to show off a little to Hugo, but her spirits also slumped when she saw how miserable he was. So, they quietly set up their tents on the shore and settled for grilling hot dogs instead of cooking a finer meal.

It didn't take long for Minna to clean the

fish—her father had taught her how. How dearly she wished he could be there right then; and Valter, too, who always knew how to put people into a good mood! Minna was sure that if her dad were camping with them, then Hugo's troubles would have never happened in the first place. No "Catfish" or "Seppy" would've dared to pull a trick like that if they'd seen a man like her dad Artur. Unfortunately, the damage was already done. When Minna's dad called her that evening, she didn't mention Hugo's incident, but gave him a detailed account of the fishing instead. Now, she was rolling the cleaned fish into aluminum foil and nestling them into the coals to cook.

Katya, Hugo, Paul, and Minna weren't the only campers on the lake that night. Another fire flickered in the distance, and bustling around it was the same old man who'd been fishing from the boat on the lake earlier. Before long, they noticed the beam from a lone flashlight dancing towards them. The old man had come to visit.

"Hey there, neighbors!" he called out in a raspy voice, stopping at the edge of their campsite.

The man was truly ancient: his face was lined with deep wrinkles, a bristly beard poked from his jaw, and a blue ski hat was pulled down over his gray hair.

"Brought you kids a little treat."

The old man walked up to the campfire and handed Minna a large charbroiled fish wrapped in foil. Katya and Paul came closer to inspect it. They'd

never seen a pudgy specimen like it before.

“Is it a carp?” Minna asked.

The old man whinnied.

“Good one! This is a tench, also called a doctor fish. Haven’t you seen one before?”

Minna shook her head.

“I’ve only ever heard my dad say they’re around here.”

Hugo stood up, too, and came closer.

“Did I hear that right? A doctor fish?”

The old man started giggling even louder.

“Sure it is! I’ve been catching them my whole life here.”

Hugo felt excited. He lowered his nose to almost touch the scales and inhaled.

“What a smell! May I try a little bite?”

“A little bite?!” the old man exclaimed. “Feel free to wolf down the whole thing. That’s what I brought it over for.”

The old man and his charbroiled doctor fish had come at just the right second. Instead of gloomily vanishing into their tents for the night, the friends leapt into action. Minna pulled salad materials out of her backpack while Paul gathered up some dry sticks and blew life back into the coals. Katya and Hugo finally produced their fancy picnic basket, which held all the necessary dishes and a large picnic blanket.

“Oh-ho! Looks like the party’s just getting started!” the old man chuckled. “My name’s Rein.

Lived here by Grove Lake my whole life and been fishing for as long as I can remember. Back when I was a boy, I fashioned myself a pole out of hazelnut branch, stuck a worm on a hook, and started casting. I could spend whole days sitting by the river or the lake. Later, they made me go to school and to work, of course. But now it’s been ages since anybody could tell me what to do. I just grab my tackle box and pedal over here, sometimes for days at a time.”

It appeared that Rein had been alone for a long time and was enjoying the company. The table was set and the irresistible-smelling doctor fish was waiting to be devoured.

“Bon appétit, friends! Everything’s as right as rain again!” Hugo exclaimed, taking a sip of tea. He appeared to be in a much better mood, which also spread to his companions.

Rein parted the fish open from head to tail and everyone forked some onto their plates.

“Now, let’s all enjoy this long-awaited moment,” Hugo said, taking the first bite. “Mmm . . . it’s unbelievably tender and . . . has a bit of a . . . mossy aftertaste.”

“Oh, come on! There’s no mossy aftertaste!” Rein scoffed. “Doctor fish just tastes a little muddy, is all. It spends its whole life living in the muck, you know. I’m used to it, but some people refuse to take a bite because of the flavor.”

“No, no, don’t get me wrong—that flavor is just what makes it interesting,” Hugo argued. “Some

fish can be really bland, but this one has a very specific taste.”

Hugo had heard many good things about doctor fish before but had never gotten the chance to try it for himself. Rein agreed. Doctor fish was sometimes even called “the poor man’s eel”, he told them. It could be pickled, fried, or baked, but was particularly scrumptious when smoked.

“Well, this has honestly been the finest morsel I’ve ever had, if I do say so myself” the old man said approvingly. “And I suppose that’s just why this lake is so popular with fishermen—it draws them in like wasps to honey.”

“They say a thing draws bees to honey, not wasps,” Paul interjected.

Rein regarded Paul for a few long moments. It appeared he wasn’t a fan of smart alecks.

“You know, boy, I’ve seen all kinds of characters up to all kinds of things around this lake over the years. It’s a nature reserve, environmentally protected. That means you’re only allowed to fish with poles here—if you’ve got the proper permit, of course—but under no circumstances with nets. Nets are strictly forbidden and the fines are pretty steep. Still, you come across some who put them out in secret. Oh, a few of them do get caught, but the lake’s so well stocked that they find it’s worth the risk. The inspectors can’t manage to keep their eye on it all the time. So, there’s a fair number of wasps buzzing around this here jar of honey, indeed,” Rein

said, pointing to the lake.

“I got stung by a couple of wasps today, already,” Hugo sighed before telling the old man about the sad turn of events.

“Ole Ottoson, eh?!” Rein exclaimed, wide-eyed. “Slapped you with a ticket, did he! Ottoson’s not a bad fellow, don’t get me wrong, but he can’t take a joke with poachers. Once he sets his sights on you, there’s no talking yourself out of it. You’ll get the full brunt of the law. But he’s an honest man, that’s a fact. Not like those two who duped you. What were they called, now? Catfish and Seppy? Never heard of them. Lord knows what hole they crawled out of.”

Rein was quite the talker. It appeared he hadn’t enjoyed such appreciative listeners in a very long time. Minna, Paul, Katya, and Hugo snacked on the doctor fish while the old man regaled them with story after story about Grove Lake and life in those parts. They ran out of fish meanwhile, but that wasn’t a problem because Rein nipped back to his tent and returned with a fresh one. Then came the fisherman’s tales.

“The biggest doctor fish I’ve ever caught in this lake weighed nearly four kilograms. Don’t believe me? Nobody does; they just laugh when I tell them. I don’t mind, though. Anyway, I reeled it in from this very lake. Quite the whopper, with seaweed growing right on its back. I swear! Wasn’t fit for eating, though—the meat was as tough as an

aspen branch.”

Katya laughed at Rein’s stories, but was pleased the most by the fact that Hugo was acting like his old self again: eating doctor fish, chuckling to himself, and giving her loving gazes.

Minna had unrolled her sleeping mat on the mossy forest floor, slid into her sleeping bag, and was listening to Rein’s endless tale with her arms crossed behind her head, staring up into the night sky. Paul was stuffed and felt his eyelids weighing heavily. He reckoned it was the right time to crawl into his tent and go to sleep. As he was slowly getting up so as not to disturb the others, Rein asked if they’d ever heard the old legend about the doctor fish of Grove Lake.

“How can it be that not one of you knows it!?” the old man gasped. “Well, then I’ve got no choice but to tell you.”

Paul squatted back down, tossed a couple of twigs into the fire, and listened.

“Once, long ago, back during the Great Northern War, the young Swedish king Charles XII and his army stayed the winter at Laiuse Castle. It’s not far from here, you know; maybe a little over fifteen kilometers as the crow flies. There was a short break in the fighting. The Swedes had dealt a mighty blow to the Russians in the Battle of Narva, so Charles decided to hunker down in Laiuse to wait for spring. But now, he had tons of time on his hands. He held feasts, went hunting for moose and

bears, and became pretty popular among the local Estonians over that winter. Ever since then, there’ve been all kinds of legends told about the Swedish king around these parts. This is one of them.

“They say that from time to time, the young royal enjoyed riding around the area without his entourage. One day while out on one of those little jaunts, he rode quite far from the castle and found himself here at Grove Lake, where a poor shepherd was fishing. The man had already filled a big tub with plump doctor fish. Seeing this, the king got a hankering to do a little fishing, too. So, the Swedish king and an Estonian shepherd were fishing together on the shore when all of a sudden, they spy a small party of Russian soldiers coming out of the woods on the opposite shore. The king had no time to flee. So, the shepherd had him peel off his fine clothes, rolled them up, and hid them beneath a bush. The king was left standing there barefoot and in nothing but his britches! The shepherd rubbed mud all over the king’s face and linens, too, so that he’d look more like a peasant.

“When the enemy troops got to the two men, the shepherd ordered the king to get up and give the soldiers’ horses some water to drink. The Russians were made to believe that a peasant and his mute servant were simply fishing by the lake, and continued on in peace. The king was beside himself in joy to have made such a miraculous escape. He carried on fishing and finally hooked a huge doctor

fish. Still all happy and amazed, he released it back into the lake. And for saving his life, Charles gave the shepherd a grand farmstead. Thus, the lowly shepherd was suddenly made the master of a whole farm.

“A few years later, a man was fishing at Grove Lake and caught an old doctor fish with the monogram of the Swedish king, Charles XII, emblazoned clearly in the scales on its side: two Cs facing away from each other, glittering like little rainbows in the sunlight. The man recalled the tale of the king’s narrow escape, and released the fish back into the water just like the king did.

“Ever since then, there’s many a fisherman who’ve caught a doctor fish with a monogram glinting on its side here at Grove Lake. They say they’re descended from the very same fish the Swedish king caught. If you make a wish when you release one back into the lake, then it’s said to be sure to come true.

“I’ve caught my fair share of doctor fish from Grove Lake, of course, but I’ve never yet laid eyes on a magic fish like that.”