

*My Father's Lures*

Short Story

Janet Abbott Dutton

15 Wheelwright Court  
Greensboro, NC 27455

[janetdutton@att.net](mailto:janetdutton@att.net)

913-710-3724

---

The logo for Silver Arts is written in a cursive, handwritten style. The word "Silver" is in a larger, more prominent script, and "Arts" is written in a smaller, similar script to its right. A horizontal line is drawn through the middle of the letters, giving it a stylized, artistic appearance.

**Artist's Name:** Janet Dutton  
**Title of Entry:** My Father's Lures  
**Category:** Literary Arts  
**Sub-Category:** Short Story  
Greater Greensboro Senior Games

Dad examines his lures, and then prays. In answer comes the voice of the Lord saying, "Use super dupers".

"Got my limit," Dad says a big grin on his face. Entering through the back porch, he lays his hat on the cream separator, opens the door to the kitchen, makes sure Mother is watching and then pulls a string of fish out of a bucket and dumps them on the enamel-top table.

"Got five nice big ones, used my super duper lures as the Lord commanded. Ruth, you know I think I've found the secret of the lure. Yesterday I got up in the morning with the faith to move mountains. I told the Lord, 'I'll put on a super duper and you do the rest.'"

Dad is all smiles – "I had the time of my life this morning, Ruth. Yes, Ruth," he repeats, "I had the time of my life. You should have seen it – The Snake was rough and high. My, I can still hear it roar. Got wet too. Rushing water got clear up on the bridge where I had my line. Dangerous too. Fishermen have been pulled right off that bridge and swept away by the big ones," his small grey eyes dancing, "but I held my own," Dad says, looking at Mother.

But Mother, stirring at the stove, doesn't look at him. "Austin, take those fish outside and clean them.

"I was hoping you would clean them, Ruth."

He plops in the rocking chair by the table, leans back, his broad shoulders pushing against the rungs, and lays his long arms across his chest.

"Austin, can't you see that I am busy? I don't have time to clean those dang fish. You'll have to do it yourself." The grease from the potatoes spits on her face.

"Maybe one of the girls could do it," Dad says as he unfolds the newspaper.

Mother doesn't answer and her face gets a steely look.

Dad's sales route for the *Idaho Daily Statesman*, follows the rivers: the Snake, the Salmon and the middle fork of the Payette. At night, he camps and he fishes off the bank or he wades in the river.

On the job, Dad likes to fish early morning and late evening for the “smallies” as he calls them. He cuts the head off each fish as he catches it, tosses the head away, and then puts the remainder of the fish in his shirt pocket. He owns two shirts. One has permanent bloodstains on the pocket, and this is the one Dad fishes in. He also wears his navy blue serge wool suit, the same suit he wears to work, to church and to fish in. He wears boys' black high-top shoes and white socks, he is only five foot two, – and high-water britches a size too big at the waist, his black belt cinched tight, so that his pants gather over his round belly. In a small pocket at the waist, he carries his watch attached by leather to the jade heart his father brought as a gift from his Mormon mission in New Zealand.

On Fridays we wait for Dad by the row of lilacs and cosmos that Mother planted that grow along the house all the way to the gravel road. We watch for Dad to drive up in his black 1930 model A ford – well, it used to be black but he let us paint it blue – part blue anyway – never did finish one door and the front fender. Mother was furious. “Austin, that's your work car, don't you care about your job – what will they think of you?”

This Friday Dad arrives with a box of pears.

After supper, we sit around the kitchen table eating sliced pears while Dad brags about his sale, “I tell the farmers bits and pieces that I read from the newspaper – usually something about President Roosevelt. If they bite, I reel them in with more of the story. I told farmer Andrew today about FDR condemning the Nazi invasion of Belgium and Holland. He swallowed the bait hook, line and sinker – bought a subscription – bought a subscription right then and there. I had to trade him out for pears though.”

“I'm glad to have the pears, Austin,” Mother says as she begins preparing them for canning.

Dad stands. “I asked all the waitresses on the road to marry me.” Proudly he demonstrates his technique. I begin with the bait. “I tip my hat, smile, then I lure them in with my



charm as they set down the coffee, I snag them with a wink, and then I go for the catch, "Will you marry me?"

"Thought you were married?"

"Of course," I always tell them, "but it's the Lord's will for me to have many wives, to live the true law of polygamy."

Mother reaches for the basket of laundry. "Lord knows I could use the help of a sister wife," Mother says folding a pile of diapers. Then she is quiet, her thin face wrinkled in thought, "but the ones you are talking about are so young I'd end up having to take care of them too."

Dad looks at Mother and smiles "You know," he tells us kids, "I lured your mother in the first time I saw her. She was standing on the steps of the church. The sun cast a light upon Ruth, her skin glowed. I thought – it is a sign. I set my line and she bit – she sure did, swallowed that bait right up," he grins and looks at us.

I see my older sister Venetta roll her eyes. The "real lure" was that Dad was not a farmer, had a good job, cash, a checking account, and even a car. Mother's parents only had a horse and buggy. But the biggest hook was that he was a Mormon. Mother's parents came all the way from England to live the Mormon life.

"Ruth, I could use a nice hot bath."

"Yeah get that dang fish smell off you. I can't wait until tomorrow."

"Will you boil some water for me, dear?"

Dad pulls the tub into the kitchen. Mother pours teakettles of boiling water into the tub. Dad soaks until his skin is all wrinkled. Then he climbs out of the tub and streaks across the room, beet red, and steam coming off his naked body, yelling, "Don't look girls, I'm coming through, and I'm naked." Dad has lots of hair on his chest and around his pee thing.

"Dad likes to air dry," I say.

"No, he just likes to be naked." Mother answers.

Each Saturday evening we take turns bathing. Neal carries the big galvanized tub into the kitchen. We all use the same water, but each person gets more hot water added as we step into the tub. Lou and Faye, 'the girls' are first, then Venetta, or Netta, a name she hates, is next, and then Neal, 'the boy', and then me. Mother always washes the babies, Johnny and Chrissie, on the table in a dishpan. They get more baths each week than any of us. Last of all Dad and then Mother get into the tub. That was the order until we discovered Neal and Dad pee in the water. Now Neal and Dad go last.

On Saturdays, if Dad doesn't go fishing, he drives us to town for pig, chicken and duck feed, and a few staples: flour, sugar. Sometimes we take a butchered pig or calf to the lockers in town.

"I'm low on supplies, Austin," Mother reminds Dad.

"Try to make do dear; this is the weekend I promised Jan-pan-dear, I would take her to fish in the Payette River."

My name is Janet but Dad calls me Jan-pan-dear.

Dad brags that he will teach each of his seven children to fish. This is my weekend. He has a favorite spot where we camp and cook on a wood fire between two rocks. But on the way, we stop at the Golden Café. "I bet you'd like some pie, Jan pan." Dad orders two slices of banana cream pie and coffee for himself. He sits back on his stool and grins, looking around to see who is listening. "Watch this, Jan Pan, watch me lure her in. I'm going straight for the catch this time. Then he motions to the waitress to come to the counter, leans forward and whispers his line, "I want you to marry me," he tells the waitress and winks like he always does.

She looks at him stunned. "Are you some kind of wacky polygamist?" she asks.

"I am a polygamist," Dad brags, sticking his thumbs in his belt, "and God has commanded me to take another wife. I feel you'll be perfect. I feel the Lord wants you to pray on my offer."

"Let's go Dad," I tug at his shirt.



At the camp spot, Dad, still wearing his suit pants, takes off his fedora hat and removes one fishhook out of the band. He leaves his suit jacket and the pocket watch on the shore. Then he wades across the stream casting ahead, dropping the hook into the ripples where the current breaks. "See those ripples?" He looks back at me to see if I'm watching. "That's where the fish are."

I put my feet into the icy cold water, pulling up my dress to follow Dad. I always wear a dress, all Mormon girls do.

Dad turns to me, "Jan-pan-dear, see this lure?" He pauses for effect. "I started to tie on the Panther Martin lure. Then I think to myself – the big fish are too smart for this lure. And lo, the voice of the Lord tells me to change the hook."

I don't hear the voice of the Lord.

Dad wades out further in the stream with his new lure. He casts across and begins pulling it back. Then Dad says, "I hear the voice of the Lord saying 'Austin, faster.'"

"But, Lord, I'm pulling as fast as I can." Dad answers.

Soon he turns to me, slaps his hip and cries out, "Wham bang, Janet, I got a big un."

Dad catches his limit in about a half hour.

He pulls a small iron skillet out from under the seat of the car and fries the fish at our camp spot. He always brings Van de Kamp beans to eat just in case he doesn't catch any fish. Then he takes off his one pair of socks and washes them in the stream using a bar of Fels Naptha laundry soap that he always carries with him. He places the wet socks between the layers of the quilts and crawls on top of them. "Dries them every time by morning," he says.

Dad fishes again, early morning.

When we get back home, Mother is cutting some potatoes and green tomatoes to fry. There are sacks of rotting potatoes left over from the fruit stand stacked beside our house. We eat potatoes every meal. "You'll need that frying pan for the fish," Dad says and then pulls his catch out of a bucket and dumps them on the table. "I used my super duper lure again," he grins

and washes his hands in the bucket of water setting on the stove, the bucket we use to wash our hands and the vegetables.

Mother doesn't look at him but says, "Austin, take those fish outside to clean them."

"I was hoping you would clean them, Ruth,"

Mother doesn't respond.

"All right dear, I'll take them outside to the pump," Dad says.

I go out to watch him. I lean against our peach tree that grows in front of the pigpen, the tree that Dad hangs the calves and pigs on to slaughter. Then Dad guts the fish, throwing the guts to the chickens and ducks.

"Ruth, he calls, "here are some beauties for that pan. But the big one got away," he winks.

Monday morning, Dad is getting ready to leave for work. He packs his one pair of socks, fishing gear and Wellington rubber boots into our Model A car.

Mother looks up from the wash bucket and reminds him, "Austin, I need the Wellingtons to irrigate the corn and watermelon. I'll be knee-deep in water this afternoon."

I smile. She looks funny, a proud five foot seven woman irrigating in her blue patterned dress and knee-high rubber fishing boots.

Dad takes the boots out of the car and sets them back on the porch

On his route, Dad tries to sell polygamy as well as subscriptions. Dad tells Mother when he returns home at the end of the week, "Another one got away."

"Austin, you're going to lose your job with all that preaching," Mother says.

Dad does lose his job. Now all the money we have comes in from Mother's fruit stand and Dad's unemployment which he spends for bus tickets to travel to polygamy camps in search of a wife. Sometimes he's gone for weeks.

We never know when he will come home, one night he pops in. He throws his hat on the table as he enters the kitchen.



"It didn't work out too well, Ruth."

"Take that filthy hat off my table, Austin."

Dad picks up his hat. "I went to the camps but no bites and then on the way home, I stopped in a café. The waitress started to cry when I bent over for a kiss. See, I told you I'm really trying, Ruth." He raises his arms and shrugs. "It's just not working out."

The next trip he checks out the hired girl that works for our Uncle Chauncey.

Back home again without another wife, Dad puts a huge fork of hash in his mouth. We try to find out what happened, but he won't talk about it. "Forget it, forget it," he repeats. When we press him, he puffs out his breath "She turned me down flat, not even a nibble, doesn't want to be a polygamist's wife." He has an odd hesitation in his voice, his hands tense; he puts them in his pockets and says, "I know I'm 'chosen. But the Lord hasn't revealed your new Mother to me yet," and then he grins. "Haven't found the right lure."

Later Dad is clipping his toenails in the living room while listening to the radio.

"So, did you clip your nails in front of the hired girl?" Mother asks, "I bet that's why she rejected you."

Dad stands up and walks closer to the radio, turns the volume up.

After Dad's unemployment runs out he mopes around the house. Finally, he moves us to the Promised Land, Independence, Missouri. Mother opens a café.

Dad doesn't pay any attention to us children. He used to show off for us. Stand on his head or recite poetry. Now, he never even picks up the baby, he acts as if she belongs only to Mother. He used to bounce the little kids on his knee and read stories aloud to all of us from the paper. Now evenings he reads Joseph Smith's book *The Doctrine and Covenants* where the revelation of polygamy is or *The Book of Abraham*. He doesn't read the Bible – tells us it isn't translated correctly. "*The Book of Abraham* speaks the truth of the Bible," he tells us. "I am Abraham," he says. "I am Abraham."



My father's dream of living polygamy has not happened. His expensive waders and fishing poles sit unused and dry in the corner.

Mornings he waits till we all leave for school and Mother opens the café, and then he, Abraham, spends hours in a regular indoor bathtub with running water, lying in the warm water with only his head out, hearing the roar of the Snake River, feeling the rushing water as it splashes up to the bridge, holding his own, pulling in the big ones with his super duper lures.