

City Fishing

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After weeks of talking about it, Jimmy's father finally decided to take him fishing. Jimmy's friend Bill, and Bill's father who was Jimmy's dad's best friend, also were to go. Their mothers didn't approve.

Jimmy wasn't sure he approved either, actually. He had somewhat looked forward to the event, thought that he should go, but as the actual day approached he knew fishing was the last thing he wanted to do. It seemed to be important to his father, however, so he would go just to please him.

"Now, look what we have here, Jimmy. Everything you need to get along in the wild." Jimmy's father was tall and dark-haired, and the deep resonance in his voice made his every word seem like a command. He gestured toward a display of tools, utensils, and weaponry. "Hunting knife, pistol, wire, gunpowder, hooks and sinkers, poles, small animal trap, steel trap, fish knife, stiletto, Bowie, .22, shotgun, derringer. You have to have all this if you're going to get along in the wild. Remember that, son."

Jimmy nodded with hesitation.

Bill had run up beside him. "Look what I got!"

Jimmy had already seen out of the corner of his eye a dark shape in Bill's left hand. As he turned to greet his friend he saw that it was a large, dead crow, its neck spotted with red.

"Dad caught it, then I wrung its neck while we had the feet tied together. I thought I'd bring it along."

Jimmy nodded.

Loud noises were coming from the house. Jimmy could hear his mother weeping, his father cursing. He walked up to the front steps and watched through the screen door.

He could make out Bill's father, his father, his own mother, and a young red-haired woman back in the shadows who must have been Bill's mother.

"You can't take them!" He could hear his mother sobbing.

Then there was a struggle as his dad and Bill's dad started forcing the women into the bedroom. Bill's mother was especially squirmy, and Bill's father was slapping her hard across the face to make her stop. His own mother was a bit quieter, especially after Bill's mother got hurt, but she still cried.

His father locked the door. "We'll let you out, maybe after we get back." He chuckled and looked at Bill's father. "Women!"

It all seemed very peculiar.

As Jimmy's father pulled the battered old station wagon out of the driveway he began singing. He looked back over his shoulder at Jimmy and winked. Jimmy figured that singing was all part of fishing since first Bill's father, then Bill, joined in. Jimmy couldn't follow the words.

"Make a real man out of him, I think," his father said to Bill's father. Bill's father chuckled.

They didn't seem to be getting any farther out of the city. If anything, they seemed to be driving into the downtown section. Jimmy had never been downtown.

"Are you sure this is the right way to the stream, Dad?"

Jimmy's father turned and glared at him. Jimmy lowered his head. Bill was gazing out the window and humming.

They passed several old ladies driving cars with packages and shopping bags filling the back seats. His father snickered.

They passed young girls on bicycles, their dresses fluttering in the wind. They passed several strolling couples, and a man with a baby carriage.

Jimmy's father laughed out loud and punched Bill's father on the shoulder. Then they were both laughing; it sounded as if they were almost crying. Jimmy just stared at them.

The shopping malls were getting smaller, the houses darker and shabby.

Jimmy's father turned to him and said fiercely, almost angrily, "You're going to make me proud today, Jimmy."

Bill was beginning to get fidgety as he looked out the window. Every once in a while he would gaze at the back of his father's head, then at the buildings along the street, then back out the rear window. He began scratching his arms in agitation.

Jimmy gazed out his own window. The pavement was getting worse -- dirtier, and full of potholes. The buildings were getting taller, and older, the farther they drove. Jimmy had always thought that only new buildings were tall.

They passed a dark figure, wrapped in rags, crumpled on the sidewalk.

Jimmy's father chuckled to himself.

They had left the house at noon. He knew it had been noon because he'd just eaten the lunch of soup and crackers his mother had fixed.

The sky was getting dark.

Jimmy put his cheek against the car window and tilted his head back so that he could see above the car. Tall smokestacks rising out of the dark roofs of the buildings across the street blew night-black clouds into the sky. The smokestacks were taller than anything he'd ever seen.

Jimmy felt a lurch as the car started down the steep hill. He had been in San Francisco once, and there were lots of hills that steep. He couldn't remember anything like that in their city, but then, he had never been downtown.

Bill was jerking his head back and forth nervously. His eyes looked very white.

The buildings seemed to get taller and taller, older and older. Some had columns out front, or wide wrap-around porches. Many had great iron or wooden doors. There didn't seem to be any people on the streets.

It suddenly occurred to Jimmy that the buildings shouldn't be getting taller as they went downhill. The bottoms of these buildings were lower than the ones farther up the hill, behind them, so their rooftops should be lower, too. That was the way it had been in San Francisco. But looking out the back window he could see that the roofs got farther away, taller still as they descended the hill. The buildings were reaching into the sky.

Dark figures scurried from the mouth of an alley. Jimmy couldn't tell what they looked like; it seemed to be almost nighttime out.

Jimmy's father and Bill's father were perched on the edge of their seats, apparently searching every building corner. His father was humming.

Bill began to cry softly, his feet shuffling over the rumpled carcass of the crow.

The street seemed to get steeper and steeper. Occasionally they would hit a flat place in the road, the car would make a loud banging noise, bounce, then seemingly leap several feet into the air. The car was going faster.

His father laughed out loud and honked the horn once.

It was black outside, so black Jimmy could hardly see. The two fathers were singing softly again. The car was picking up speed with every clank, bounce, and leap. Bill was crying and moaning. Jimmy couldn't even see the sky anymore, the buildings were so tall. And so old! Bricks were falling into the street even as they passed. Stone fronts were sagging, the foundations obscured by piles of powdered rock. Beams were obviously split and cracked, some hanging down like broken bones. Windowpanes were shattered, curtains torn, casements grimed. Jimmy couldn't understand how the buildings held themselves up, especially when they were so tall. Miles high, it seemed. If he hadn't been taught better, he would have thought they hung down from the sky on wires.

He was bouncing wildly up and down in the seat, periodically bumping into Bill, who was crying more loudly than ever. The car was like a train, a plane, a rocket.

A loud clank, then something rattled off to his left. He turned and saw that a hubcap had fallen off and was lying in the street behind them. Shadows moved in a side doorway.

The car was groaning. Bill's wails were even more high-pitched.

"Daddy . . . daddy. Bill's afraid!"

His father stared at the windshield. The car dropped another hubcap.

"Daddy, the hubcaps!"

His father remained motionless, his hands gripping the wheel. A brick fell and bounced off the car. A piece of timber cracked the windshield.

The car squealed, roared, and dropped further and further into the heart of the city. They seemed to have been going downhill for miles.

It suddenly occurred to Jimmy that they hadn't passed a cross street in some time.

"Daddy . . . please!"

The car hit a flat section of pavement. The car body clanked loudly, the engine died, and the car rolled a few feet before stopping. They faced an old building with wide doors.

Jimmy looked around. They were in a small court, faced on all sides by the ancient buildings that soared upwards, completely filling the sky. It was so dark he couldn't see their upper stories.

He looked behind them. The steep road rose like a gray ribbon, disappearing at the top. It was the only road into the court.

Everything was quiet. Bill stared silently at his father. The dead crow had been trampled almost flat by Bill's agitated feet. The floorboard was filled with feathers, pieces of skin, bone and blood.

There were shapes in the darkness between buildings.

Jimmy's father turned to his friend. "Bottom. We made it." He began rummaging in his knapsack.

He was handing Jimmy the rifle, smiling, laughing, saying "That's my boy!" and "Today's the day!" when the dark and tattered figures began closing in on the car.

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