

When Fear Fails

“WAYNE, WAYNE,” called out a man’s voice from a ball of light above Detroit’s Fort Wayne. It was a ghost. Codell and his little brother Winston stared as the ghost broke up into luminescent motes and floated the way bread crumbs drift soundlessly under water, and in their fearless ignorance they ran toward it, but it blinked like a defective street light and went out.

The fort was cool and so ancient that Indians were buried in the mounds outside. It was in the shape of a star and overlooked a narrow part of the Detroit River, strategically located lest the Canadians cross the river and attack. Codell and Winston lived there with their mother, downriver from Detroit. Not in the fort, but in a soldier building. They got moved there a year ago, after their house burned in the riots.

Not long after they had braved the ghost, the two boys set out with their mother on a day trip up to Belle Isle. It was Wilson’s first time to the park, and it was a picture-postcard Saturday morning in June. They put on shorts, packed lunches, and rolled towels. Codell got his fishing string, tied to a safety pin for a hook and a nut for a sinker, and his cockroach cage. It was a Chinese cricket cage that his mother had given him when he was little.

“Hold it right there, young man.” His mother looked pointedly at the cage.

“I need to find out if cockroaches make good bait!”

“I don’t care what kind of bait they make, I paid good money for that. It stays home. Take a piece of bread.”

Belle Isle was a long bus from Fort Wayne, Line 19 up Jefferson Avenue with a lot of stops along the way. They got a transfer at Cass and Lafayette to Line 67, and the bus got crowded. A woman settled heavily across from them and spilled into both adjacent seats. Wilson's eyes widened. "She's *fat!*" he exclaimed. The woman frowned at the impertinence and looked disdainfully over their heads.

Codell punched Wilson in the shoulder. "Don't go calling people fat," he said. "She's not fat. We say 'large.'" The woman shifted her eyes to their mother.

"No, we do NOT say 'large,'" his mother reprimanded. "We say NOTHING. I am so sorry," she said to the woman. "I am mortified. *Mortified.*" The corners of the woman's eyes twitched wanly.

The bus rode Jefferson up the Detroit River, and Belle Isle came into view. They transferred to another bus and took a wide, long bridge out to the island. Wilson gawked at the river. "How deep is it?"

"Over your head, that's all you need to know." Codell and his brother had no more experience in water than a fish had on land.

The bus dropped them off near the center of the island. It was huge. In the middle of it, you can't tell that you're on an island. The island is so big, it has lakes on it, and the lakes are big enough to have their own islands.

A 15-minute walk from the bus carried them to a shady table inland at the park. They ate their lunches and scrounged up a stick to use as a fishing pole, and then it was a short walk from the table to the beach. Before they even spread their towels, the boys

splashed headlong and hooting into the river. They both stayed close to shore. Their mother watched until they returned and dried off.

Codell picked up the fishing stick with the string, safety pin hook, nut sinker and bread crust. "We're going fishing," he declared.

"Pardon me?" said his mother, with more ice than the mid-day sun could melt.

"May we please go fishing?"

"Yes, you may. Be careful. I'll be here reading. Keep an eye on Wilson."

"Don't worry, he's more afraid of water than I am."

A short distance from the beach, the Detroit Yacht Club dominated the island shoreline. Codell and Wilson contemplated the grid of docks. Two men on their way in from the docks carried fishing gear and life jackets.

"Excuse me," asked Codell, "which dock is a good one to fish off?"

"Fish off a dock here? Take your pick, they're all the same," one of the men laughed. He surveyed the two boys with their fishing stick. "What are you, kid?"

"What am I?"

"Mulatto? Hawaiian?"

"No, I dunno, we're jus' fishin'."

"It's a private club, you're not supposed to be here unless you know a yacht club member."

"Yes, sir, yes sir, we do know a member," said Codell. The two men looked doubtful. They continued in toward the club.

Codell and Wilson walked out on a dock shaped like a T, turned left at the top of the T, and walked to the end. Codell tied the string to one end of the stick, tore a piece from the crust, hooked it on the safety pin, and dropped it into the murky water. The nut sinker quickly carried it out of sight. After some few seconds, he pulled it up. The bread was gone.

“I want to catch a big fish,” Wilson said. “Use a bigger piece of bread.”

“That won’t help. We need better bait. I wish mom would’ve let me bring my cockroach cage.”

“You should’ve brought goldfish crackers.”

Codell baited another piece of crust on the safety pin and handed the stick to Wilson. “Here, you try.”

Wilson dipped the tip of the stick into the water. “Keep the stick out of the water,” Codell ordered. “You’ll scare the fish away.”

“I think I caught something!” Wilson yanked the stick up and, because the string and safety pin were still in the water, he walked backward – off the other side of the dock. He barely made a sound.

“WILSON!” Wilson plunged straight down, the top of his head sinking out of sight. He let go of the fishing stick. The stick hovered below the surface.

“HELP!” Codell jumped in feet first and tried to grab the fishing stick thinking that he could reach Wilson with it, but the coldness of the water, and the realization – the instant, tardy, fearful realization that the water was over his head, too – these

stunned him. He flailed and his hand hit something hard, a wooden dock pylon; it was green and furry and the water was green and above his head the blue sky was warping and getting farther away. With both hands he grabbed the pylon, cold and slimy, water up his nose, gasping water into his lungs, and he shimmied his hands up the slimy pylon, pulling himself up until his head broke through into the air, sweet precious air. **“HELP ME! HELP ME! HELP!”** He slipped back under the water, again water up his nose, everything under water colored and clouded green, again pulling himself up the slippery wood, head again above water, coughing up water and crying for help, the pylon above the surface dry and warm, clinging to the pylon putting splinters in his hands, sobbing for Wilson someplace deep beneath him unseen and horrifying. In a matter of minutes strong hands lifted Codell out of the water.

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In their nest of towels on the beach, the boys' mother listened to the sirens cross the Belle Isle bridge. She watched the police and fire department race to the yacht club. She felt it in her stomach, in her chest, in the entirety of her being, and she ran to the docks where a crowd had gathered. In the pandemonium, someone's foot kicked the bread crust into the water where it drifted down and the fish fed on it.

Hours later, their towels remained on the beach where they'd left them. The police drove Codell and his mother home. The June air was warm, but Codell could not stop shivering.

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