

Star-crossed.

2009 April 13, Northborough, Massachusetts. Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, age 54 and born in '54, died underneath his dump truck when his clothes got entangled in the truck's power shaft and suffocated him.

1998. "If I could invite anyone in the world to dinner," Fidrych said, "it would be my buddy [former Detroit Tigers teammate] Mickey Stanley, because he's never been to my house."

1983. Fidrych, age 29, retired from professional baseball. Pitching for Boston's minor league Pawtucket Red Sox and wracked by injuries, he gave up an average of 9.68 earned runs per game.

1980 October 1, Toronto, Canada. Game as ever in trying to rehabilitate his ailing arm, Fidrych pitched his last game for the Detroit Tigers, giving up five runs in five innings and getting the win, 11 to 7.

1980 September 28, Detroit, Michigan. Tiger pitcher Dan Petry started the Tigers' last home game of the season, and so it was Codell's last parking scam of the season. He made a cool \$100 charging Tiger fans five bucks a car - just five dollars! - to park on a vacant lot that he didn't own. After filling "his" lot, he caught an outbound bus and went to his neighborhood pub, the Bronx, to watch the game on TV. The Tigers beat the Yankees 6 to 5 in ten innings. The tenth was a disaster for New York: the Tigers won on a double, a batter hit by a pitch, a walk, and a ground ball error.

Written by K.G. Jones.

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“Hey,” the bartender said, giving Codell crap. “Did you chauffeur for Fidrych again?”

1980 August 14, Detroit, Michigan. The Bird turned 26 years old.

1980 August 12. Detroit, Michigan. At the Bronx that night, Codell watched with special interest as Mark Fidrych pitched his last home game for the Tigers, going eight innings in a one run loss to Boston.

It had been a remarkable evening, so Codell bought shots and beers for himself and his bar buddy. “The Bird gave me this twenty,” Codell announced.

“What, you crossed paths with a star?” asked the bartender.

“Yeah, there’s his autograph,” said Codell’s buddy. “On the twenty. Secretary of the Treasury.”

“Sure. Just like I met Ken Parker one time,” said some Italian guy.

“And the Pope heard my confession,” said Buddy.

“No, really,” said Codell. “Fidrych gave me this twenty.”

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There was a big crowd - 48,361 - on August 12 because it was Mark Fidrych’s last home game. Due to all those Bird watchers, parking was scarce and Codell had a rich night fleecing the lambs. He upped his parking fee to six dollars per car, waved 30 cars into “his” lot, and convinced a few others to pay for free street parking by promising that he’d keep an eye on their cars during the game. He would’ve thanked The Bird personally if Fidrych had given him his number.

Codell, who liked to be at “his” parking lot before batting practice, was running late that day. Instead of taking the Trumbull bus to the lot, for this game he’d had an unexpected ride in and a \$20 bonus.

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Earlier that day, Codell had been on his way to the in-bound Trumbull bus stop, walking near the Lodge expressway, when a green subcompact struggled up the exit ramp and sputtered to a stop. The door swung open; a young man unfolded his lanky frame out of the car and popped the hood. Steam poured from the radiator and profanities from the driver. “Not again! This is the last thing I need right now.”

“Hey!” the motorist called to Codell. “Can you take me to Tiger Stadium? I need a ride bad. My car’s overheated all day.”

“I don’t have a car,” Codell said.

“What about a bus? Where’s the closest bus line?”

“That’s where I’m headed. But you don’t want to leave your car around here.”

“Great. That’s great.” He took off his Tiger cap and wiped his brow. Long curly hair sprang out and bounced on his neck. “Is there a gas station around here? I need distilled water. I’ll take any water.”

“Closest gas station is a ways. I can get you water. My apartment’s a block away. I don’t have a lot of time. I need to get to Tiger Stadium, too.”

“Going to the game?”

“Working it. Parking cars.”

"I'm working it, too," said the motorist with a big lopsided grin. "I'm pitching today."

Codell peered closely with a should-I-know-you look. "The Bird? You're Mark Fidrych?"

"Yah, that's me. I'm already in deep shit for not being down there on time.

"Listen," Fidrych continued, "get me some water in my radiator and I'll give you a ride in. I'll pay you."

Fidrych and Codell double-timed it to Codell's apartment. They were about the same age, height and weight. "We could be twins," The Bird joked with a toothy smile.

They got a bucket of water and rags, and returned to Fidrych's car. "Hope it cooled down enough to open the radiator," said The Bird. "Hope one bucket's enough," said Codell.

Fidrych emptied the bucket in the radiator, flicked on the hazard lights, started the engine, and crawled the car down Trumbull. "What's your name?" Fidrych asked.

"Codell."

"Cordall?"

"Codell." They didn't have much to say, and it wasn't far to the ball park. They were a few blocks from the stadium, north of the Fisher Freeway. "Can you drop me off here?" Codell asked.

The Bird swung over. He pulled out his wallet and gave Codell a twenty.

"That's my number, man. Number 20. You're a life saver."

“Hey, no problem. I’ll be watching the game on TV. Good luck.”

“Thanks - I’ll need it. My shoulder’s killing me. Do what you got to do, throw through it.” Already, he was talking to himself again.

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1977. The Bird, age 22, tore the cartilage in his knee and then tore a rotator cuff. He felt his arm go dead. He hurt like crazy, but he kept pitching.

1976. Mark Fidrych, age 21, burst brightly into major league baseball. He was phenomenal from the get-go. He pitched fast, he pitched with control, and he pitched complete games. It helped that the Tigers’ defense was smothering. At one point, The Bird’s earned run average dipped to 1.85. He started in the All-Star game for the American League, only the second rookie to receive that honor. He was rookie of the year. He was runner-up for the American League Cy Young award.

Measured by his entertainment value, by the love of fans who refused to leave until he took a curtain call, and by his ability to increase ticket sales, The Bird was beyond phenomenal. On average, 20,000 more fans showed up when he pitched than when he didn’t pitch. When he took the mound, he strutted around, full of energy, talking to himself, talking to the ball, getting on his hands and knees to manicure the dirt. He was authentic and contagiously enthusiastic. By mid-summer he was baseball’s national sensation, making the cover of *Sports Illustrated* twice, appearing on one of those covers with his namesake, the *Sesame Street* star Big Bird, whom he

resembled. The rock music magazine *Rolling Stone* featured him; he was the only baseball player ever to appear on their cover.

The Bird was a star to be sure, but better than that, he was a blazing comet, shining brightly, briefly, in the baseball firmament and then vanishing as quickly as he appeared.

“But damn,” he said, “it was great.”

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To the extent that this is factual, the facts are mostly from Wikipedia.