

Fishing With Dad

By Damian C. Sanders

Marcus Hill ran a thumb across the cork handle of the dark blue rod he'd used for twenty years. The rebuilt rusty reel had seen dozens of lakes across four states. It was time to retire it, but all of Marcus' extra fishing money went toward gear for his two sons.

Ten-year-old Ben joined his father in the garage and found his setup; it was new, but the color matched his father's. Ben cherished the moment he'd graduated from a kid's fishing rod. Now he could be just like dad. Seven-year-old Micheal still used his GI Joe fishing setup, with a push button reel.

"You got the worms?" Marcus asked his boys. He loaded the gear into the truck.

"Yes sir," the boys answered in unison. Ben put his pole and tackle box next to his father's. He extended a hand and helped his brother do the same.

A blanket of morning dew sat on the uncut lawn, reflecting early morning sun rays that peeked through the trees. A pair of squirrels chased each other across the lawn and up a neighbor's tree, as birds whistled sweet tunes. The aroma of bacon and eggs satisfied the nose; Mrs. Brown across the street was already up and cooking for her retired husband. Seattle's finest slowly crept past the driveway; the officer's badge shined bright, and he never took his eyes off Marcus Hill as he drove on.

"We should get moving, boys." He watched the police car disappear around the corner. "We don't want anyone to steal our spot."

Marcus loved his truck, a jet black S10 Blazer with deep tinted windows. It sat low to the ground on custom rims and it still smelled new. He made sure the boys' shoes and clothes were clean before they could sit in it. He even brought extra clothes on the fishing trips. He popped in the boys' favorite tape, and the

three of them rhymed along with The Fresh Prince as they drove toward Seward Park.

A white cat strolled across their path as the trio drove up a short hill. It belonged to someone in one of the many houses with perfectly cut lawns, garden statues, and cherry trees. A relatively quiet neighborhood; the houses got bigger the closer they drove to the park.

Seward Park was one of Seattle's oldest and most favorite recreational spots. It sat on a peninsula near the south end of Lake Washington, an icon of Seattle. Joggers and stroller-pushing couples traveled the two-mile loop that boasted views of Mercer Island, Bellevue, and Downtown Seattle.

Marcus entered the park. The tennis courts and swings were empty, but a single man shot hoops on the basketball court. Marcus drove through the old growth forest and parked near the old amphitheater. Hours from now, the upper loop would be a car show full of chrome rims, hydraulics, custom paint jobs, and bass booming systems. But for now, in the early morning light, Marcus and his boys shared the lot with a small maintenance crew.

"Okay," Marcus said as he lifted his tackle box and pole from the truck. "Rules."

Ben rolled his eyes. "We know, Dad."

"Say 'em anyway."

"Don't rush the cast. Don't yank the line. Be quiet." Michael chanted as if the rules were magic fish-catching spells.

"And?" Marcus prompted.

Ben sighed. "Be patient."

Marcus smiled. "That's the one."

They followed a dirt trail that twisted through the old growth. It was an easy quarter-mile hike that finally merged with the main walking trail that followed the peninsula. Marcus and his boys nodded at elderly couples who enjoyed the nice morning before things got too hectic. Within a few hours,

hundreds of people would descend on the place, all of the foot traffic and noise spooking the fish. The three fishermen found their favorite spot, a small clearing between thick bushes and evergreen trees. The shore was just large enough for the three of them. Marcus placed his tackle box on a large downed tree that stretched from the shore into the cold lake waters. The boys did the same.

“See that ripple?” Marcus pointed to a spot just beyond the tree. “That’s not wind. That’s movement. Something alive.”

Michael squinted. “Fish?”

“A big one too.” Ben deduced.

“Could be. I guess we’d better find out,” Marcus cast his line, leaving room for the boys to work around the tree.

Ben cast to the exact spot of the ripple and gave a satisfied nod and grin to his little brother. Michael missed his mark, the bait and hook splashing short and wide of his target. He was about to whine, but something tugged on his line so hard, it nearly pulled the rod from his hand.

“You got something, boy!” Marcus shouted. “Now, bring him in, slow and steady like I taught you.”

Michael reeled the line slowly, pausing to adjust the drag. Half a minute later, with Ben scooping the fish with a net, he held a larger than average sized perch. The trio high-fived and congratulated him on the catch. It was his biggest ever.

As Marcus ran a stringer through the fish’s mouth, a man invaded the spot. He was two heads taller than Marcus, younger and full of muscles. His slick curls peeked from beneath a black L.A. Kings hat, and he wore a matching thin black Kings jacket; the bulge of a pistol showed from the pocket. Two gold teeth glimmered in the morning sunlight.

“Boys,” Marcus said. “Check your bait. Might be time to switch.”

Marcus met the man halfway, just out of the boys’ sight. He took a quick glance to make sure the kids were focused on their task. He gave the man some

dap.

“Looks like y’all is having some good luck.”

“Can’t complain,” Marcus agreed. His face was serious and strong, no hint of fear.

“Didn’t know you’d bring company.”

Marcus’s expression didn’t change. “They’re fishing.”

The man shifted his weight. “This isn’t exactly—”

“It’s exactly what it is,” Marcus cut in. “You got it?”

The two men put their business on pause as the game warden’s green and white truck pulled to a stop on the trail. He was a muscular man, walked with a limp, and smelled of cigarettes and lake water. He marched to Marcus and the young stranger. “How are you all doing today?”

“Just fine, sir.” Marcus nodded. The other man was silent.

“Its a nice morning out. You catch anything?” The warden’s eyes searched the men and children.

“I did!” Michael said.

“And I helped!” added Ben.

“Well lets take a look at what you’ve got there!” The warden made his way to the kid’s and their catch.

The young man frowned and put his hand over his left hip. Marcus couldn’t see a gun, but he knew the man was armed. He looked the young one dead in his eyes, and shook his head. His partner paused for a moment and then crossed his arms.

The warden talked fishing with the kids and told them how impressed he was with their catch, after measuring the fish and making sure it was legal. It was. “You guys have fishing licenses?”

“They are too young,” Marcus said. He produced the license from his wallet.

The warden checked it out. Satisfied, he turned to the other man. “What about you?”

“Oh, I don’t have one. I aint fishing.” The young man said. “I’m just out for a hike and stopped to see junior’s catch. It’s cool to see youngsters landing a big one. You know?”

The warden studied the man for a long moment. Their unblinking eyes locked, both waiting for the other to flinch. The warden was still, he felt something was off about the man. But he decided he’d have better things to do. “Alright. Well you guys have a good rest of the morning.”

“You too,” Marcus replied. He didn’t breathe easy until the warden was in his truck and moving down the trail. Marcus sighed inside; that was too close. Thankfully, no brains got spilled.

“Back to business,” said the young man. He reached into his jacket, pulled out rubber band wrapped wad of cash. Marcus exchanged it for a hidden package in his tackle box.

“You sure about this? Kids around—”

Marcus stepped closer, his voice dropping just enough to carry weight. He pushed the package into the King's jacket. “Nobody looks twice at a father teaching his boys how to fish.”

The young man nodded, turned, and disappeared through the trees. Marcus stood there for a moment, watching the lake like nothing had happened.

“How are you boys doing? Catch anything?” Marcus returned to his kids.

“Nothing biting,” Ben said.

“Mine got tangled.” Michael held up his line.

Marcus walked over, kneeling beside him. “Let me see.” His hands moved with practiced ease, untangling the line, retying the hook. “You know why this happens?” he asked.

Ben shook his head.

“Because you rushed it. You gotta take your time. Every step matters.”

They fished for another hour. Ben finally caught something—a small, wriggling fish that sent him into a shouting fit of excitement. “I got one! Dad, I got

one!”

“Easy, easy. Don’t lose it now.”