

God's gone fishing

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God's Gone Fishing

by Thomas White

He used to go down to the boat-house almost every night and sit at the counter reading until his coffee got too cold to drink. In his two or three hours there, he'd read a magazine like the Scientific American or the Saturday Review from cover to cover, all of any western novel that happened to be around and apparently every word of the newspapers. It was eerie the way he remembered everything he read, but he seemed to be glad to stop reading to talk with anyone that walked in; he remarked once that, «As long as you're talking or reading, you're not thinking.» He kidded with the boat-boys and their friends, gossiped shamelessly and, when they were alone before closing, talked about «serious» things with Mr. Mathews. Though everyone seemed to like him well enough, he didn't make a very vivid impression on people; he was referred to as «the kind of heavy guy with the white cap.» Not that they talked about him much. He was pleasant, kind and ordinary, and that's about all there was to say on the subject.

His cub-like harmlessness brought out the more ferocious friendship of the teenage set. Their affection took the form of hazing. They'd jab him in the ribs, make much of his knuckles in a handshake and toss his cap to one another until it was crushed and dirty. Flattered by all this attention, he'd grin and try to defend himself ineptly. When Mr. Mathews decided they'd gone far enough, he'd chase them out with startling anger and comment, «Charlie, you're too darned good-natured.» That's always intended to carry a sort of warning but Charlie would go on grinning, insist the kids didn't mean any harm and go back to what was left of his magazine or book. It was actually this, by the way, that kept people at a distance. They could easily understand someone who sat in the boathouse every night for three hours talking, but reading that much was something else again. It made them uncomfortable. His full description around there ran, «The heavy guy with the white cap that's always reading.» Something a little odd there.

Now and then Carlos would stride in, and the two of them would talk scientific technicalities for hours. Carlos was a short Mexican-American weight-lifter who took home one-twenty every week as an electronics engineer. Mr. Mathews sat these sessions out with a newspaper, but he noticed that now and then they'd put their heads together and talk softly as if telling a dirty story; they'd laugh loudly and only get back to electronics when Mr. Mathews accidentally made a noise. He was neither offended nor curious; he knew a lot of people that bored their listeners with personal interests and never had the good manners to lower their voices like this.

Then came the cold, autumn night with the place empty and Charlie reading and Mr. Mathews closing up a little early for a change. It must have been close to eleven when this young fellow came in and ordered coffee. His was a new face, but you could see he was one of the cycle boys in his boots, jeans, leather jacket, white visored cap and heavy

sideburns. He was pretty goodlooking in a rugged sort of way. Mr. Mathews didn't pay much attention to which of them started the conversation but pretty soon they were yaking like old buddies. A little later when Charlie yawned and rose to go, the cycle boy said he guessed he should get on, too, and they left together.

They walked along the edge of the lake. The young guy was talking himself into a fever about how much he'd like to have himself a girl tonight. He got highly descriptive. Charlie smiled: «Then what are you doing here in the park?» Well, it was kind of late and anyway there was a chick looking for him and he didn't want to be found and besides he didn't have a cent. Charlie looked him up and down as if taking a picture, turned and started out of the park: «Well, I'll see you around.» The other said, «Hey, don't rush off,» and tucked the front of his skivvy shirt in deep. Charlie didn't seem to notice as he started on again with a friendly goodnight. This time the young guy caught up with him, laid a hand on his arm and said, «Aw, you wouldn't walk out on a buddy, would you?» Then he drove his big fist hard into Charlie's middle.

When the red cloud passed, Charlie saw they had company. It was two of the kids that hung out at the boat-house. They were on either side of him with knives at his neck. They took his war surplus watch and the four bucks of grocery money. They dropped the wallet at his feet and took off fast. He grabbed it up and drove home shaking and numb. Even after he'd locked the door behind him he stood shaking helplessly and feeling sick. And when he happened to look at the phone, the sickness exploded in him. The phone was the police and the police were worse than a whole park full of thugs—because he was on probation.

He didn't go out at night for weeks after that. But time nibbled away caution and pretty soon he slid back into almost all of his old habits. Except for going to the boat-house or even near the park. In a few weeks he began seeing the two kids with the knives again. The cycle boy they'd used as bait had vanished for good but these two took right up where they'd left off. When it became apparent Charlie hadn't dragged in the cops, they got increasingly bolder. The older one always greeted Charlie with a loud «Hi there, Ace!» which always seemed to tickle the younger one; he'd stop wherever they were and go into a broad but silent pantomime of laughter.

And not long after, there they were on either side of him again. It was in the dark parking lot behind the market. The older one put a lot of appeal in his question, «Hey, Ace, lend us a buck, huh? We need it bad.» Charlie could have dropped his two bags of groceries and gotten a lot of attention by yelling for help—if they didn't have those knives along tonight. He could tell all the cops he'd never seen these two before and they'd probably believe him for all of three seconds before the kids popped out with, «He tried to make us!» Then there'd be a routine check and . . . Charlie had to smile a little as he put the groceries down on the fender of his car and pulled out his wallet.

The next time they were sitting in the back seat and wanted a couple bucks apiece. A week later they got five off him on the crowded avenue in broad daylight. And there was the time they hailed him only a few

yards from a parked squad car; the cops watched the whole transaction without interest.

You can get resigned to something without getting used to it. Charlie accepted the situation with a half-smile but he was jumpier now, thinner, dreamed a lot every night. Every time he saw a cop he'd get this impossible yes-and-no feeling. He wanted passionately to tell them about the whole thing and be protected and not outside anymore, yet he knew exactly what they'd think of his story when the probation angle came out. Then he'd be put in a cell . . . Nor could he confide in some preacher or even a friend; he could hear them saying, «You're all wrong about the police! They're there to *protect* you! Now, get your cap. We're going down and record this whole terrible thing.» Nor could he tell that irritable, fish-eyed probation officer. Naturally he should just move out of the neighborhood but all this blackmail had put him back in his rent and he refused to skip out. That would be stealing worse than the kids in the park. And the time was getting nearer and nearer that they'd find out where he lived then he'd have nowhere at all to hide. He could not read long anymore, movies got intolerable silly and he hadn't turned on his TV for over a month. And constantly the foolish thought, «But I didn't *do* anything!»

So he took out a loan, paid up his rent and got ready to move the end of the week. He hated to go after all these years but the whole neighborhood had become a nightmare. As the last days slid by, he got the urge to go down to the boathouse for just one more coffee. He'd liked it there so much. Surely nothing would happen just this once, this last time.

Mr. Mathew shouted, «Well, Charlie, where the heck have you been!» and came around the counter to shake his hand. Charlie said something about being under the weather and sat down beside Carlos who was beaming, too. They'd both missed him! He felt funny in the throat. In no time, it was like nothing had happened. Carlos was yaking about this new hydrogen theory, Mr. Mathews was reading his paper, the coffee was steaming in front of them and everything was good. Then all at once like a voice in his ear, «This is the last time,» and he was crying. Carlos said, «You and me, let's take a walk.»

«Okay, kiddo. Where you been? Guest of the city?»

«Oh, no. Just a little sick.»

«You know, Charlie, everytime someone mentions you down at the boat-house, the kids all get a great big yuk. I haven't found out why yet.»

Charlie stared down at him in anger. He said, «Big joke, huh?» and began spilling the whole thing out. His words flooded and he ended with, «Now, don't ask me what I was doing in the park in the first place!» Carlos looked at him a minute and said, «Quiet. I'm thinking.»

The signal at the corner ahead was green but Charlie drove slow enough to be caught by the red. He stopped and looked exaggeratedly away from the two lounging against the mail-box. Seeing him, they trotted to the car, piled in and announced that Acey Boy was taking them to town. As Charlie drove swiftly into the park, the older one frowned but continued a touching plea for cash. The younger one's arm hung over

the back of the seat. His hand touched something funny back there. It was hair. It was a head. It was someone crouched on the floor.

He lurched forward, rammed his head into the windshield. The older one said, «What's eating you, fella?» and started to look over the back of the seat. He saw nothing but a fist that rose up out of the darkness. Nothing more happened for several minutes as Charlie drove into the darkest part of the park.

He parked, flicked out the lights. Instantly the guests grabbed for the door handle but the voice in the back said, «Just sit.» They did and the next minutes contained some of the utterest silence these two had ever twitched through. The air grew musky with sweat and someone's wristwatch got as audible as the works of a time-bomb. And still nothing happened.

Charlie's voice was subdued but it made all three of them jump. He spoke to the backseat: «It's no good. Beating them up won't do.»

«What!»

«It'll just make them sure they're right and they'll be worse than ever.»

«Scum like this couldn't be worse. You forgotten these last three months so soon?»

«But I don't want revenge! It wouldn't get me back my lost sleep. All I want is to be left alone!»

«That's just exactly what they've counted on all along. The whole thing's your own fault, you know.»

«Yes, so we'll *have* to let them go.»

«So they can branch out and do this to other guys. But you're not interested in other guys because that might look like you wanted some nasty old revenge. Well, let me tell you, vengeance may be the Lord's but He's on vacation. And all His clergymen are too busy with other souls. Don't call them; they'll call you. You scare politicians and the public hangs out a DO NOT DISTURB sign. So all you got is cops to look after you and playmates like this to romp the empty playground with after midnight. My friend, nobody cares about you. You fight your own fight or it doesn't get fought.»

Charlie took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and said. «No, let them go. It's my show and I don't want any violence. There's a chance we've scared them and they won't—maybe they won't . . .»

«Charlie, they won't change. Beside being killers, they think it's their holy duty to kill guys like you. They only change in the movies.»

«I'm sorry but let's everybody go home, huh?»

«Okay, up till now, it's your show. From now on, it's mine and you two guys listen. You haven't seen my face and just remember it might be any face you see coming at you on the street. You'll never know but I'll know you and, so help me God, you get out of line as much as steal a pin and I'll kill both of you. I mean kill you.»

The younger one had sense. He jumped out and took right off into the darkness, crashing into bushes and falling down the hill as fast as he could. But the older one just couldn't resist whipping out his shiv and slashing with it into the rear seat. The voice back there said a soft, «Ahhh,» and nothing moved for a moment.

Charlie came to life with a terrible roar. Shouting, «You've killed him!» over and over and crying like a baby, he grabbed the young guy and pulled him out into the road. Then he beat and pounded and stomped and clawed and gouged, all the time shouting, «You've killed him!» The guy didn't have a chance. All he could do was hug Charlie's legs and try to hide his pulpy face, but Charlie went on and on like a machine.

All at once he stopped and looked up frowning. Somewhere along in there the headlights had come on so he could see what he was doing. He strode to the car. His voice was accusing: «Carlos, you're not all right, are you?» The backseat was all comfortable with cigarette smoke: «You think I didn't expect something like that? Man, you hurt my feelings.» Charlie stood there and swore at him for a long time. There was a feeble rustle in the bushes as the late passenger crawled off somewhere in the night.

Driving back, Charlie spoke once: «All the same I hate violence.» Carlos shrugged: «So do I. But surgery is violence, too.»

As if in a movie, all the young guys in the neighborhood became very respectful of Charlie. The hazing stopped. At first he felt more outside than ever when no one interrupted his reading; on the other hand, he didn't have to grin so good-naturedly any more because they spoke to him man-to-man now. It was a new experience. He didn't read so many westerns now; the heroes no longer seemed quite so amazing. He knew he was being silly as hell but the fact remained he'd never felt so self-satisfied.

BOOK REVIEW

McCAFFERY

a novel by Charles Gorham (Ny: Dial Press, 1961: \$ 3.95)

Vincent McCaffery is sixteen when his frail mother dies, worn out by the sexual desires of his powerful bull of a father.

The boy's belief in Catholicism dies too, replaced by a rage to spit in the face of his Yorkville slum environment. Jackrolling in Central Park provides an outlet for the rage, with Vincent turning himself into a lure for homosexual victims. One of these victims leads him to a call house where he becomes available to customers of either sex. But here he meets a «clean young whore» named Doreen, and love is born.

Yet Vincent is also made part of the household of a rich homosexual. If you think that all this reads like the life of Fanny Hill, you are not far off the well-worn track.

The violent ending can be foreseen, after the young lovers try vainly to escape from what they call the life of the «Nursing Home» where they work.

The tale is a tragic one. The reader feels pity for the central character, but the cards are so neatly stacked that there is an air of predestination, of déjà vu, about his fate. Vincent McCaffery is a pallid cousin of James Farrell's Studs Lonigan.

Diego De Angelis