

Truth and Innocence

By Barrett Shumaker

Daddy took me fishing with him and the other fishers today! He made me my very own bamboo fishing pole and said that when I'm older we'll go into town and see about finding me a better one! One of the good ones like Mrs. Davis' pretty gold one or the McQueen brothers' silver and black ones. The one daddy made me doesn't have a reel on it so I'll have to stay close to the shore.

Mrs. McIntosh was at the check-out gate collecting people's chits so we could leave town and everybody would know where we were going. Since today was the first time I've ever left town she had to make me one. She wrote my name and how old I am on the front and daddy's and mommy's names on the back and then hung it on the board.

Daddy says Mrs. McIntosh is the toughest old lady he's ever met. He said she beat up some lady named Katrina and walked here all the way from Louise Anna's all by herself! Mrs. McIntosh is really, really old. At her birthday party one year Daddy said that when God said, "Let there be light," Mrs. McIntosh was the one that flipped the switch. Mrs. McIntosh thought that was funny and smiled at daddy and smacked daddy on the booty and said she wasn't that old.

A boy in my class, his name's Astin, he says that his daddy says that Mrs. McIntosh is the last black Irishwoman left in the whole wide world. I asked daddy what that means and he said Astin's daddy was being mean and that I could never say that again or tell anyone about it either and that if I did he was gonna spank me for it.

I wonder how far away Irish is?

We left through the front gates after the inside guard waved at us to go through and the outside guard said there were no zeds around. He said good luck to me and daddy, and daddy asked him what he wanted for dinner. The outside guard said all he wanted was poon and laughed. I asked daddy what kind of fish poon is and he said I'd find out when I was older.

The lake is a long, long way from town. At least that's what I think. Daddy says it's actually really close to town but because I'm little it only feels like it's a long way away.

We walked in the woods next to a big, big valley so no one would see us. Daddy said we had to stay in the tree line until we got to the lake. Then we could come out and go fish.

I told daddy I was gonna catch the biggest fish ever!

Mrs. Davis poked me with her fishing pole and asked me if I knew my B's. I said yes ma'am and she said you sure and I said yes ma'am and she said could I say them for her and I said OK.

I said the 3 B's of Discovery are Be calm, 'cause if you get scared of them you might mess up and they'll get you. And the second B is Be aware 'cause if you don't pay attention they might get you. The last B is Bring a grownup 'cause when you tell a grownup they can go kill it.

Mr. Junior slapped me hi-five and Mr. Danny gave me a piece of candy for doing such a good job! It was the best candy ever! It was one of the hard clear green ones that

Mr. Danny's always asking Uncle Billy to bring back when Uncle Billy and the Go-fers go out for supplies. Lots of people ask Uncle Billy to bring stuff back for them 'cause that's his job. He's a Go-fer and Mr. Junior and Mr. Danny aren't. They keep telling me to call them Junior and Danny but momma and daddy said it's not polite and that I should really be calling them Mr. McQueen and Mr. McQueen but since they told me not to I can call them Mr. Junior and Mr. Danny.

Mrs. Davis said my smarts came from momma's jeans. I asked why momma's pants made me smart and everybody laughed and said I was funny too.

When we got to the lake I was so excited I swung my pole out and got my fishing line caught in a tree. I didn't think they would let me go fishing anymore and I cried.

Mr. Junior said daddy throws his line in the tree all the time and I felt better. Me and Mr. Junior went looking for bait and found a bunch of worms under a big rock. When we got back daddy had my pole fixed and had put a red and white bobber on it so I could see when I caught a fish.

Everybody was telling stories and having fun and nobody had caught nothing yet except for Mr. Danny. He caught a log and couldn't get his hook back and had to cut his line and put another hook on it.

After a while I got bored and wanted to do something else and daddy said I had to stay close and not run off. I found a stick and pretended it was a sword but it broke so I laid down in a sunny spot on some grass and squashed some ants.

When everybody thought I wasn't paying attention they started talking real quiet, like when mommy and daddy do when they don't want me to hear what they say. Mrs. Davis said she was sorry for his loss and daddy said thank you. Mr. Junior asked if it was around here and daddy said it was over by the big rock down the bank a bit. He said Uncle Billy and Aunt Judy were skinny dipping when it happened.

Uncle Billy isn't skinny but Aunt Judy is.

I guess Aunt Judy was dipping something of daddy's in the lake and lost it. I guess that's why everybody was so sad last summer.

I thought it was because Uncle Billy was gone looking for survivors and we might not ever see him again because that happened to a boy at school once. His mommy went looking for survivors and never came back and that was a way long time ago. Like two years ago and his daddy was really sad for a while and then he got better.

Uncle Billy's really strong so I bet he's gonna come back. And if he's out looking for survivors I bet he's out looking for a Mikey Mouse watch for me too. Uncle Billy says every time he goes out with the Go-fers he looks for a Mikey Mouse watch for me to have but he says they're hard to find so I still don't have one yet. Uncle Billy's Mikey Mouse watch dances and beeps out a song called "We're a small world" when he pushes a button! It's super neat! He promised he would find me one so I know I'll get one sooner or later.

I got bored squishing ants and asked daddy if I could try and catch some fish in a different spot and he said no 'cause he didn't want me to get lost. Mrs. Davis said she'd go with me 'cause she wasn't catching anything either so we walked down the bank and around the corner and found a shady spot to fish at. The big rock daddy was taking about was just a little bit farther down the shore and I wanted to see if I could find what daddy lost. I asked her if we could go fishing by the rock and she said, "No, we've gone far enough."

We was talking about school and how I was liking class and if I liked Mrs. Baker and I said Mrs. Baker was nice but we drove her crazy 'cause sometimes she puts her hands on her head and says, "Y'all are driving me crazy," but I don't think she really means it.

Mrs. Davis said that when she was young there were a lot more kids around and that there were like twenty kids for every teacher! Man that's a lot! If I had that many kids in my class I wouldn't get to have my own ball at recess and Mrs. Baker would definitely lose her mind 'cause there's only five of us and she says we're gonna make her lose her mind but I'm sure twenty of us would do it.

After a little while Mrs. Davis said she had to go potty really bad and told me not to go anywhere and that she was gonna go in the bushes behind us but that she was gonna listen for me to yell if I needed her and I said OK but I lied. I know it's bad to lie but if I could find what daddy lost he would be really happy and Aunt Judy would be too so after Mrs. Davis went into the bushes I ran over to the big rock and looked around but I couldn't see anything but more rocks.

Mrs. Davis was really, really mad.

She came out of the bushes and said she was gonna tell daddy what I did and I better get my booty back over there PDQ. She had her gun out and everything. She said that the zeds could have come out and got me and eaten me and nobody would have known what happened to me and that mommy and daddy would have cried forever and that's when I saw it.

There was a zed in the water and it was all melted and gross. It was really nasty. It was all white and lumpy and spread out on the water by the shore. It kinda looked like the pancake batter that mommy pours on the stove when it spreads out and stuff on Sundays 'cause Sundays are pancake day. Mommy's pancakes don't have any green in them but that zed sure did. It was all white and green and brown and stuff.

And it was looking at me.

I wasn't scared of it 'cause we've seen them before at school and on field trips and in the picture books that the gate guards made for us so we could see what they look like but I didn't like it looking at me. And it only had one eye and that eye kept looking at me even after Mrs. Davis came over and told me to go get daddy.

I ran back to daddy but I kept looking at the water 'cause I was being alert like the B's say you should. I told daddy about the zed in the water and daddy's face looked weird. Mr. Danny and Mr. Junior said bad words and told me to show them where it was and we ran off but daddy didn't run. Daddy walked real slow and when he finally got there everybody said that they would take care of it and that me and daddy could go home but daddy said he wanted to see it.

So we were looking at it and it was looking back at us and it was moving a little bit but I couldn't tell if the water was making it move or not and I saw it had a Mikey Mouse watch on its arm like the one Uncle Billy has!

I asked daddy if I could have the zed's watch so Uncle Billy could stop looking for a Mikey Mouse watch for me and that maybe Uncle Billy could stop looking for survivors too and he could come home and we can play with our watches. Daddy looked at me funny and started to cry. I said don't cry 'cause the watch is dirty daddy 'cause mommy says beggars can't be choosers and that means that you should take what you're given and be happy for having it.

Daddy picked me up and kissed me and his whiskers poked me 'cause he was scruffy and he said we're going home 'cause we're done fishing for today.

Mr. Junior said they'd take care of it and come home when it was done and daddy said thank you and we went back home. I asked daddy if I could have the watch 'cause he didn't say I could have it the first time I asked and he said I could have the watch 'cause Uncle Billy would want me to have it.

When we got home I had to go wash up for dinner 'cause mommy was making dinner and mommy says if your hands are dirty you'll get sick and if you're washing your hands you might as well get everything else so I did. When I got back inside Aunt Judy was there and her and mommy were crying and daddy was hugging Mr. Junior. Mrs. Davis and Mr. Danny were telling daddy they were sorry and that they were gonna go to the bar and talk to Johnny Walker and that daddy was welcome to come if he wanted to.

When Mrs. Davis and them left, mommy and daddy and Aunt Judy told me that Uncle Billy died and that he wasn't coming home.

I was sad. I love Uncle Billy and I wanted to show him the Mikey Mouse watch I found. I cried and mommy and daddy and Aunt Judy hugged me and said it was gonna be alright.

And then everybody in town came over and they brought food and hugged and kissed me and said they were sorry and they hugged mommy and daddy and some people were crying and everybody was eating the food. There was so much food! I've never seen that much food before in my whole life!

Sheriff Marshall even came over and talked to mommy and daddy for a while. Sheriff Marshall has a 6-gun and a sword and I don't think he ever takes them off. Lots of people in town carry swords but nobody has one like Sheriff Marshall's. It's got this bend in the middle of it and it kinda looks like an axe but mommy said it's E-gip-chen and that E-gip is way out in a desert with three big triangle things.

Sheriff Marshall said I did really good and I followed my B's and he was proud of me and that I helped daddy out in more ways than one and when I was older I would understand. Sheriff Marshall gave me a real life police badge to wear for the week.

It got really late and after some people left daddy gave me the watch I found but I didn't get as happy about having it 'cause Uncle Billy wasn't around to show it to. My watch does all the same stuff that Uncle Billy's watch does.

I miss Uncle Billy. I bet he would have liked my watch.

I never did find out what daddy lost in the lake.