

The Escape

He stood alone in the middle of the bridge, looking out over the railing. Downstream, on both sides of the river, he could see policemen and rescuers scurrying up and down the shoreline the way fishermen do when one of them hooks something big. Occasionally, men in black wet suits surfaced in the swirling current, gestured to other men in a green police launch, and dived back down into the cloudy, golden depth. On both banks people were gradually filling in every available vantage point to view the search operation.

He glanced over at the policeman who had whistled at him and was now quickly making his way up the bank and onto the bridge. A soft drizzle was falling, but the boy was soaked to the skin, and he felt nothing.

"You know, Cory," said the officer, trying to catch his breath, "you shouldn't slip away like that. I'm trying to conduct an investigation and you're running off."

Cory said nothing. He continued to watch the black men rise and submerge.

I was just talking to the guy who pulled you onto dry land. Good thing the shad are running and the fishermen are here--you're lucky to be alive."

Cory turned toward the officer. "No, I'm not--I can swim," he replied.

"Doesn't make any difference; this river's tidal. You know what that means?"

"No, sir, I don't!"

"It means you shouldn't be messing around on some kind of make-shift raft. The water's going in and out from the bay; there's a dangerous undercurrent." The officer stared at the boy a few seconds. "Besides," he continued after quickly glancing at his watch, "I'll bet it's not even two o'clock yet--why aren't you in school?"

The officer smirked in triumph when Cory did not answer him. He felt he now had the upper hand as he gazed at the small boy, who looked even smaller in his water-logged blue jeans and grey T-shirt, which clung to his slender body. But Cory only stared vacuously at the officer for a moment, and then he turned to resume watching the divers. Perturbed by the boy's behavior, the officer decided to get back to business.

"No sense staying here, Cory; someone's already notifying the Collier boy's mother. Is your mother home?"

"No," Cory replied, "she works at the Value King."

"Well, what about your father?"

Cory stared at the officer, who was waiting for a response and not smiling in mockery. "I don't have a father," Cory said, "and my mother--works at the Value King."

"The one on Elm?" asked the officer. He was interested only in getting his job over with. Cory nodded affirmatively.

"O.K., Cory, I'm going to have someone call your mother and have her meet us at your house. I got all the necessary information down by the river so I can release you to her authority."

"She's not gonna like it," muttered Cory, looking off in no particular direction.

"What do you mean?" asked the officer.

"She's gonna have to leave work again on account of me."

"Christ!" exclaimed the officer, "you could've been killed! Just like--you know."

"She's not gonna like it," repeated Cory.

The ride to Cory's house was short; he lived in a row of colorless bungalows whose back yards fronted the river two miles upstream from the bridge. There was a blanket in the police car, but Cory refused it. He stared expressionlessly out the window until he recognized his mother, arms folded in front, already awaiting his arrival. She was a stout woman wearing a brown-and-beige Value King uniform, and her eyes fixed on Cory as the car pulled to the curb. He closed his eyes and swallowed.

"Good afternoon, madam, I'm Sargeant Grillo," said the officer as he got out of the car and walked around the front. Cory let himself out and stood nearby, looking down at the ground.

"I'm Mrs. Watson, Cory's mother. Just what's going on, Sargeant? I get this call about an accident, and my son's all right, but I've got to get right home. I mean, this ain't the first time I've had to leave work on account of him."

"Well, from what Cory says, he was fishing with the Collier boy when their raft..."

"Matt Collier!" bellowed Cory's mother. She glared at Cory. "I thought I told you not to hang around that no-good.... You get inside--I'll be right there!"

They watched as Cory slowly climbed the front steps and disappeared behind a front door badly in need of paint. Then Officer Grillo said, "I have to get back down to the river, but, Mrs. Watson, I think you should know that the Collier boy is presumed drowned."

"Thank you for telling me," replied Cory's mother. "And thanks for your time and trouble."

"Aw, Cory wasn't any trouble," said Officer Grillo, getting into the car and starting the engine.

"That's all he is to me," muttered Cory's mother as the police car sped away.

"Just whattya tryin' to do to me?" yelled Cory's mother while Cory, in his same clothes, sat at the kitchen table.

"I'm not tryin' to do nothin'," he replied.

"Anything, anything," she corrected. "You wanna be a dummy, like your father was, go ahead. Keep playing hooky."

"I'm not a dummy," Cory snapped, "I just don't like school."

"So ya gotta play hooky and embarrass me when the school calls? Don't you have any feelings for me or Jamie?"

"What's this got to do with him?" Cory said angrily. Then he got up from his chair and stalked into the living room, where he slouched into an easy chair. His mother followed right after him.

"I'll tell you," she said, "Jamie's different from you; he cares about school, about everything. Miss Farrington said he's the best student in second grade."

"Aah, Farrington's an old fart," sneered Cory.

"No, you're just jealous because all you ever got were C's and D's. Well, don't you ruin it for your brother. I don't want him to suffer because of your reputation."

"Why don't you change his last name!" Cory shouted as he sprang up from the chair and stormed off to his room, slamming the door shut.

"Why don't you change yours!" retorted his mother. She paused for a few seconds to regain her composure, but the sight of Cory's closed door recharged her fury. She went down the hall to Cory's room and threw the door back open.

"Now you listen," she hissed in anger, "you're grounded for the rest of the month. And if you cut school again, it'll be the rest of the year. Another thing, I want you to stay off that river. Maybe now you learned a lesson. Look, I've gotta go back to work, and I'll be home a little late; I'm taking Jamie shopping after school. There's stuff in the fridge for supper. You make sure you're here when we get back."

Cory waited until he heard his mother start the car and pull away before he got up from his bed. He suddenly felt consumed by tiredness from his grueling swim. He took off his still damp clothes and hung them over a couple of chairs. Hopefully they would be dry by morning. Then he went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and took two aspirin for the tiny explosions he was feeling inside his head. He got back into bed, but this time deep and under the covers. Before sleep engulfed him he thought about Matt, their plans, the raft, the capsizing, the loss of everything. But he couldn't cry. It was like

Matt had said. A risk. Nothing complicated or profound. You want something badly enough, you go after it. If you don't make it, even if you don't survive, everyone will remember that you tried. So if it's your life you seek, it's worth the risk of death. Cory remembered Matt's words as he drifted off into deep slumber.

When Cory awoke, it was early the next morning. He had been too tired to eat supper the night before, and his mother never awakened him. Typical. All the yelling, belittling, and threatening. Then back to quiet disregard. He got out of bed and slipped back into the blue jeans and grey T-shirt, the only clothes he had left. Not quite dry, but satisfactory. He was hungry, but he could buy a meal later; luckily, he had kept his money in his pocket, and although a bit damp, it survived.

Once outside, Cory had little left to do. There were no supplies or fishing equipment to take with him; the river had claimed everything on their first attempt to escape. Cory went to the dilapidated, decaying, wooden excuse for a garage, removed a neatly folded package of blue and yellow, and walked down to the river's edge. He opened the self-inflating, one-person raft he had won in last year's fishing derby, popped the cartridge top, and regulated the air that in less than a minute gushed the flat canvas to life. He slid in as he pushed off into the river, mounted the oars, and was on his way. Silently, gliding along the silky surface, Cory disappeared into the morning mist. Wherever the river was to take him, he knew it would be to a better place than the one he was leaving behind.