

**A View From The Bridge**     *SunSentinel*, February 12, 1989| BY CHEROKEE PAUL McDONALD

I WAS COMING UP ON THE LITTLE BRIDGE in the Rio Vista neighborhood of Fort Lauderdale, deepening my stride and my breathing to negotiate the slight incline without altering my pace. And then, as I neared the crest, I saw the kid.

He was a lumpy little guy with baggy shorts, a faded T-shirt and heavy sweat socks falling down over old sneakers.

Partially covering his shaggy blond hair was one of those blue baseball caps with gold braid on the bill and a sailfish patch sewn onto the peak. Covering his eyes and part of his face was a pair of those stupid-looking `50s-style wrap-around sunglasses.

He was fumbling with a beat-up rod and reel, and he had a little bait bucket by his feet. I puffed on by, glancing down into the empty bucket as I passed.

“Hey, mister! Would you help me, please?”

The shrill voice penetrated my jogger`s concentration, and I was determined to ignore it. But for some reason, I stopped.

With my hands on my hips and the sweat dripping from my nose I asked, “What do you want, kid?”

“Would you please help me find my shrimp? It`s my last one and I`ve been getting bites and I know I can catch a fish if I can just find that shrimp. He jumped outta my hand as I was getting him from the bucket.”

Exasperated, I walked slowly back to the kid, and pointed.

“There`s the damn shrimp by your left foot. You stopped me for that?”

As I said it, the kid reached down and trapped the shrimp.

“Thanks a lot, mister,” he said.

I watched as the kid dropped the baited hook down into the canal. Then I turned to start back down the bridge.

That`s when the kid let out a “Hey! Hey!” and the prettiest tarpon I`d ever seen came almost six feet out of the water, twisting and turning as he fell through the air.

“I got one!” the kid yelled as the fish hit the water with a loud splash and took off down the canal.

I watched the line being burned off the reel at an alarming rate. The kid`s left hand held the crank while the extended fingers felt for the drag setting.

“No, kid!” I shouted. “Leave the drag alone ... just keep that damn rod tip up!”

Then I glanced at the reel and saw there were just a few loops of line left on the spool.

“Why don`t you get yourself some decent equipment?” I said, but before the kid could answer I saw the line go slack.

“Ohhh, I lost him,” the kid said. I saw the flash of silver as the fish turned.

“Crank, kid, crank! You didn`t lose him. He`s coming back toward you. Bring in the slack!”

The kid cranked like mad, and a beautiful grin spread across his face.

“He`s heading in for the pilings,” I said. “Keep him out of those pilings!”

The kid played it perfectly. When the fish made its play for the pilings, he kept just enough pressure on to force the fish out. When the water exploded and the silver missile hurled into the air, the kid kept the rod tip up and the line tight.

As the fish came to the surface and began a slow circle in the middle of the canal, I said, "Whoeee, is that a nice fish or what?"

The kid didn't say anything, so I said, "Okay, move to the edge of the bridge and I'll climb down to the seawall and pull him out."

When I reached the seawall I pulled in the leader, leaving the fish lying on its side in the water.

"How's that?" I said.

"Hey, mister, tell me what it looks like."

"Look down here and check him out," I said, "He's beautiful."

But then I looked up into those stupid-looking sunglasses and it hit me. The kid was blind.

"Could you tell me what he looks like, mister?" he said again.

"Well, he's just under three, uh, he's about as long as one of your arms," I said. "I'd guess he goes about 15, 20 pounds. He's mostly silver, but the silver is somehow made up of all the colors, if you know what I mean." I stopped. "Do you know what I mean by colors?"

The kid nodded.

"Okay. He has all these big scales, like armor all over his body. They're silver too, and when he moves they sparkle. He has a strong body and a large powerful tail. He has big round eyes, bigger than a quarter, and a lower jaw that sticks out past the upper one and is very tough. His belly is almost white and his back is a gun-metal gray. When he jumped he came out of the water about six feet, and his scales caught the sun and flashed it all over the place."

By now the fish had righted itself, and I could see the bright-red gills as the gill plates opened and closed. I explained this to the kid, and then said, more to myself, "He's a beauty."

"Can you get him off the hook?" the kid asked.

"I don't want to kill him."

I watched as the tarpon began to slowly swim away, tired but still alive.

By the time I got back up to the top of the bridge the kid had his line secured and his bait bucket in one hand.

He grinned and said, "Just in time. My mom drops me off here, and she'll be back to pick me up any minute."

He used the back of one hand to wipe his nose.

"Thanks for helping me catch that tarpon," he said, "and for helping me to see it."

I looked at him, shook my head, and said, "No, my friend, thank you for letting me see that fish."

I took off, but before I got far the kid yelled again.

"Hey, mister!"

I stopped.

"Someday I'm gonna catch a sailfish and a blue marlin and a giant tuna and all those big sportfish!"

As I looked into those sunglasses I knew he probably would. I wish I could be there when it happens.