Bluefish for Breakfast: a Southerner's Tales of Carolina and Elsewhere

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Tyrrell County Cottontail

There's a Tyrrell County cottontail's foot on my dash, I popped him with a 20 gauge a few years ago. I'm driving, driving out to Judge Mack's, out to talk to the old man. I've given him a call, but he doesn't know why I'm driving over. He might as well be part of the family, he's Uncle Mack to me. A district Judge for the Eastern District of North Carolina, he almost always smokes a pipe, and is damn tough on the crack dealers of the crumbling downtowns of places like Rocky Mount and Wilson and Elm City, and on the methheads who're out in the country. He talks like he never left Deep Run, near Kinston, probably just so the big city lawyers who've probably never shot a gun really have to try and listen to him. But the Judge graduated from West Point, did three tours, or "terrs" as it sounds when he says it, in Vietnam. The guy won Silver and Bronze Stars. He was on Richard Nixon's defense team, ran for the U.S. Senate, and now he's a senior District Judge for rest of his life. He's someone I've always admired, someone I had hoped to make proud.

It's a nice crisp winter afternoon. I've got one more semester of college left, at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, and there's nothing like a drive to really clear your head, to

think about what's going to come next. School's flown by, too fast, way too fast. And probably, in the last few years, there's been too many beers, too many hazy nights and mornings with whiskey eyes and ashtray breath, and a few girls who probably didn't really give a damn about you, the rest of the day wasted in grogginess and fast food. Maybe too much acquiescing and going along with what all my buddies were doing, not deciding to be who I had wanted to be before. Out here, out the window of the truck, there's rows of green winter wheat, and it's sprouting through the sandy soil on either side of the flat road. There's only the slightest bit of a hill going down towards Cattail Swamp creek closing in on to Elm City. The fields around here don't quite stretch as far as they do in Hyde or Tyrrell County but they still do go on for a ways.

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I remember we were at my buddy Caswell's land near the Alligator River when I shot that rabbit. There was me, Caswell, Jack, and Caleb and it was Christmas break of our sophomore year. It was deer season but we didn't see much most days, so once dusk started to roll in we'd start drinking beers. Once it got dark enough we'd get out the spotlights, and my little brother's .22 Ruger rifle with a 30 round banana clip and Caswell's 20 gauge semi-auto Benelli shotgun. We'd grab a bunch of beers and pile in somebody's truck, two guys in the cab, two in the bed and rode around the property looking for eyes. We were drunk and happy and life was good that Christmas break. Nothing else mattered except good times and good friends. I sure wasn't thinking much further down the line than the next hunting trip, the next State game, the next party. Any thoughts about taking the military route, living a life of service, had given way to beers and guns and good times.

Caswell was into it. He'd had a bit of a gut in high school, but had burned some of it off. He was still a little pudgy from all the beers and was attempting to pull off a blondish goatee for hunting season. That was probably a good description for all of us at the time. A little out of shape, scraggly excuses for beards and mismatched camo and blue jeans and beat up leather boots.

When he was behind the wheel, he'd drive steady, but when he saw eyes, or one of us yelled "eyes!", he'd roar down the dark sandy path, through the pitch dark if there wasn't any moon, so dark you could barely see the sprouting green winter wheat on either side. His eyes were red and tired, but they sure lit up when we saw something. The truck bounced and swayed with the ruts and bumps in the dirt road, but we kept the spotlight on the rabbit, or possum, or maybe a nutria, those nasty water rats swimming in the irrigation ditches, and the thing would stay frozen, not knowing where to go, what to do.

Caswell would slam on the brakes when we were almost perpendicular to the animal out in the field or the ditch, the four wheels locked up and sliding simultaneously. If the eyes didn't run, whoever was in the bed with the .22 guessstimated about where to place the crosshairs of the scope based on the distance. 25, 30, 35, 40 yards. Or, if it did run, whoever had the semi-auto shotgun, would pop off a few shots, leading the animal, if they could get the muzzle ahead of it after about a six-pack deep. You could see the lead shot throwing up that sandy dirt as one of us shot down on the animal from the truck bed. That was damn fun. That was the most fun. We shot a bunch of possums and just left them in the fields or the muddy ditches. Caswell said they ate the baby quail, and that was bad for the few remaining coveys around. We shot for food, but we for sure shot for shooting's sake too. We ate well the next day. The rabbits, we cut up, browned on the skillet, then threw in the crock-pot with onions, carrots, and some kind of broth

and it was damn good in the winter chill that you feel out in the country when the wind whips across the open fields.

Looking at that rabbit's foot on my dash, I sure do believe that they're good luck. They've got to be. One night, out there jacklighting rabbits, we were about to come around the far Southeast edge of the property. We'd bagged a few early on and chunked them in the bed of the truck, sending rabbit fur everywhere. I'd gone ahead and cut one of the legs off, that one still on my dashboard. Caswell was driving, I was riding shotgun, Jack and Caleb were in the bed, Jack with the .22, Caleb with the shotgun. Soon enough, "Rabbit!" Caswell yelled, and with the drunken heaviness of a booted foot slamming on the gas, the truck surged forward, the engine roared. I was feeling the beers a little bit, almost sinking back into the seat with the acceleration, but I immediately heard yelling.

"Hey! Goddd-damnnit!" and some other words I couldn't fully hear and then 5 or 7 shots cracked. I heard those rifle shots crack sharp and quick, almost like somebody was shooting at us, or shooting to scare us.

"What the fuck was that Caswell! Somebody poaching on your land?" I yelled. But I soon realized that that wasn't it when Caleb banged his fist on the roof of the cab and said, "Damnit Cas stop the damn truck, Jack just fell out."

I hopped out, and sure enough, he'd fallen out, somehow didn't break his neck, or shoot himself, or us, with the loaded rifle. He'd fallen out and he'd been so pissed he'd just cracked off a few rounds into the dark.

"Goddamn Caswell," Jack said, "I think your driving privileges just got revoked."

Everything was all good, we'd gotten through our dumbass- boneheaded moves Scott-free, but we went back to the one floor tenant house and drank some more and quit the jacklighting for the night.

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One time my mom told me about Judge Mack's rabbit's foot. The old man was tough. Still is tough. Still is even though his kidney's aren't doing so hot.

"In country" he carried that Deep Run rabbit's foot with him. He had shot the rabbit with an old pump .22 rifle when he was home from West Point one winter. Kept it in his front chest pocket with a pack of smokes, underneath MACK in bold black print stitched on the outside. I never asked him about his time over there, but I'd like to. I just never've really known how. He pushed me to go to West Point. I almost did, but they took a record number because of the Recession. I was supposedly accepted with the Judge's help, but when more candidates decided to become plebes than they expected, that pushed me, being at the bottom of the acceptance list, off the list. They only had room for so many. So I ended up at NC State, which wasn't bad. I was probably glad, actually, for a while. It was damn fun. But now I'm about out with a pretty good GPA but a degree that isn't going to bring in much cash. Might've been better off learning to weld. There just hasn't been much of a guiding purpose for me, like there was before, and maybe I can find it again.

My mom told me in high school that Uncle Mack's son-in-law got sent to Afghanistan. He was a West Pointer too, and the Judge gave him that Deep Run rabbit's foot. A green second lieutenant, he was headed to some dangerous province bordering Pakistan to lead a platoon of

guys who'd been there for more than half a year. My mom said that apparently he lost the rabbit's foot on the plane. Who knows how. I'm not sure exactly how it worked out, but somehow someone on the flight crew found that rabbit's foot, and somehow Judge Mack's son-in-law got it back. I guess everyone seemed to know how important something like that was to a guy who was about to get shot at for less than 30 grand. He came home in one piece, with that rabbit's foot, and with what I'd think would be the knowledge of having no doubt that he'd done his part.

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I remember shooting Cas's dad's AR-15 out there in Tyrrell County. More or less the same rifle most soldiers shoot overseas. I remember it well. Pulling back the T-shaped charging handle with my thumb and index finger, pulling it towards the stock and releasing it, sending it back forward, sending a round into the chamber. Looking through the rear sight, through the front sight, past the muzzle, at a nutria or coyote, ever so slightly pulling the trigger, never ready for the power of that thing. Man that thing really packed a punch. Damn that thing was loud. It made me feel good. Proud. I felt solid, solid like the hard matte black synthetic and vented and notched forearm of the carbine. That power from the rifle transferred to me through the rifle's recoil into my shoulder and I remember almost feeling the bullet rip through a doe one time. The thing was only 75 yards out. Didn't even take a step after I shot. Dropped straight down. Didn't stand a chance, but we needed some dinner for the next night. I remember wondering what it'd be like if that was a person, not a deer, downrange of that muzzle.

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Now I'm driving out to the Judge's to talk to him about the military. Maybe that's what can guide me forward. It's not too late. I remember reading somewhere that less than half a percent of Americans are serving or have served. That's why so many guys were struggling after multiple tours. They'd come home and see us living on like nothing was going on. I know almost none of my friends would ever think about it. They're all patriotic at all the right times of year, 9/11, Veteran's Day, Fourth of July, but I doubt many of them even really knew anybody who'd been overseas. Dad had joined up in '86, but he never got deployed with his unit. He had to fight a different battle in the Duke hospital. He fought hard, damn hard, but sometimes you just can't win. I remember him showing me his National Guard buddies, equipped with old gear, old Humvees, old rifles, old everything, fighting right there beside the active duty guys. They were holding up a sign by a troop carrier, "ONE WEEKEND A MONTH MY ASS!" He was proud of those guys. Dad was only in the Guard, but he told me about all the times they had to get the mission done with fewer resources, working "part time," wondering if they'd still have their day jobs when they got back home. I wonder how those guys felt the first time they went over there. How they felt when they got ambushed, out in the open in the street when an IED went off. How it felt to see a person through those sights, not a deer or coyote or possum or rabbit. How would it feel to pull that trigger and feel the bullet rip instantaneously through? Was it just like dropping a deer, the thing falling with a thud to the dirt, a trail of bright red on the ground? Would it be a living breathing human being, or just some fucking haji? Or how did it feel to see your buddies get blown up and never know who the fuck did it. How hot did would it get inside a Humvee or some other troop carrier with the dust and blood and sand and spent brass. How bad was all that sand?

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If I do go through with this, I've got to cut the booze and the cigarettes. I've got to stop being a jackass. I've got to get back in shape, got to be able to crank out those pull ups, all the way down, those push ups, on cadence, sit ups, as fast as I can go. Now, I'm driving, wondering what to do. Hope it's not too late to turn things around. I'm wondering what the Judge will say. The tread of the tires hum on the asphalt, that there's that dull roar of the 4 liter Toyota engine. Out in the country with flat fields stretching on and on. Nana won't understand why I'd do it, if I do go forward with it. I can hear that stern voice and can see her white curly hair shaking a little bit as she would talk to my mom.

"I just cannot understand why anyone would choose to do that, to volunteer for something like that. Beth, he is just too smart to do that."

Maybe some guys are just hard wired to make this choice. I remember when I was little, maybe in pre-school, and we had to dress up like what we wanted to be when we grew up. I wore my dads beret and some kid sized camo cargo pants and a brown t-shirt. A little older, I remember charging up that hill in our backyard, just like my ancestors, in the front of Pickett's charge. I had a sharpened stick as a sword, a felt gray hat and I lead the way with my neighborhood buddies, my younger brother and his friends, who we forced to be the Yankees, up behind the pretend stone wall. There was just something about it. I remember saving up money for some airsoft bb guns, building makeshift forts, devising plans for how to flank my brother's defensive positions. I remember how proud my Scout leaders looked during my Eagle Board of Review in 9th grade, when I told them I wanted to go to the Academy. One of their sons was in Iraq. But for a while, during high school, whatever you'd want to call those feelings, those

desires to grab a rifle and run into the combat slowly went away. There were girls and beers and fishing and hunting and basketball and eventually college with more of the same.

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Past the crumbling mortar and rotted wood shotgun houses, across the train tracks, through flat little town, down Main Street with not much open, past where my grandmother grew up, is the Judge's modest ranch style house. The yard's flat, no driveway, and I pull in between two tall but skinny pines, stretching up. Mrs. Mack, Rae, answers the door, one of the nicest women I've ever known. She greets me with that soft, drawn out country voice. The Judge is over in his study, she says.

Inside there's an immediate smokiness, that sweet pipe tobacco aroma, like its been fully absorbed into the dark wood paneling. There's a sabre up on the mantle, and old wooden lacrosse stick, a West Point cadet helmet with the black plume, and some mounted bucks and turkeys. The Judge is old, and walks with some effort out to great me in the den. We shake hands firmly.

"Edwin! Great to see you son, I'm glad you came by. How's Miss Julia?"

"My mom's doing well Judge, she's been working in Raleigh a whole lot, think she really enjoys what she's doing."

"Good, good, how's you're little brother?"

"Doing well too, Judge, he just got into Wake Forest, actually."

"Good! Still surprised they let me into their law school! Come on sit down."

We sit on down, and he lights up his pipe.

"Now Edwin, what're your plans?"

"Well Judge, that's what I've come over here to talk to you about. I wanted to talk to you about the military, maybe doing OCS, or at least the reserves." The judge just pulls on his pipe, exhales, smoke spreading out into the room, then slightly smiles, showing his yellowed teeth just a bit.

"Edwin, knowing your daddy, I've always known you were going to serve this country in some form, but son, OCS is tough, especially with Obama's damn cuts these days, and West Pointers and ROTC guys will beat you out on the good posts and assignments."

"Yessir, I've just, I've been lacking direction Judge, and I just wanted to see if you thought it'd be the right call."

"Now Edwin, it sounds like you've already made up your mind. Do it, do it if that's what your gut says. But I don't want to you rush into this, I want you to think on it. Give me a call in a week, and I'll see what I can do. You know I'll do anything to help you and your brother out, I may be old, but I can still get things done. If you want to do it, I can give General Ryan a call."

"Yessir, I will do that."

"I'm looking forward to hearing from you," the Judge said as he stood up, "Hope those liberals up in Raleigh haven't turned you into a bowtie wearing Democrat yet!"

"Ha, no sir, well maybe just a little bit. Judge, thanks again, for everything."

"No problem Edwin, you give me a call. Tell your momma and brother we said hello."

We shake hands, and I walk over to the kitchen and hug Mrs. Mack and I hop in the truck, to drive back home. I think the Judge might be right. Maybe, maybe I've already decided. Let's do it. There's been too much wasted time, and this seems to be the only way to go that'll

make sense, to have some real purpose, to live a life truly lived. There's one thing I know for sure though, wherever this decision takes me, that rabbit's foot's coming with me.

Down on the Rapidan

What Pat heard was Randy Travis crooning those lines, that "I'm a highway junkie… I need that ol' white line," and he couldn't think of anything truer. Sometimes it just felt like he needed to get out of wherever he was. Where that was was a place full of people and places that reminded him that he wasn't turning out to be what people said he should've been, or maybe what he could still be.

It was cold and raining, gray and windy. A cool Virginia breeze blew through the cracked driver's side window of the truck. Smoke almost swayed with the country blues, before being sucked out into the early morning dawn, mixing in with the dew on the corn in the rolling fields and green grass where the cows grazed. The Toyota engine just kept on chugging through the hills, up and down, down and up, around the bends, down into the creek beds and up again. Damn the weather, Pat thought, this is beautiful country. The leaves turning red and orange and the rolling hills. This must be what England looks like. He was always looking for a reason to drive away, away from his worries, away from grad school applications and the LSAT, away

from "less serious" fly-guiding gig applications, so he'd gone up from New Bern to see Uncle Frank in Locust Dale, to do a little fishing.

He loved that thing, that truck. It was part of who he was. He bought it a few years before, when he was 19, after saving up for years. It was old and worn, but solid. He had to learn how to drive standard, and the guy who owned it before had jacked it up just a few inches. There was a .357 revolver in a holster drilled into the underside of the dash by his right leg. He once had to pull it out when some black dude tried to rob him on 3rd street in Greenville. He once drove it out to Wyoming for a summer job working at a fly shop. Some 2,000 miles each way. There were flies hooked through the cloth underside of the roof. He looked and he remembered. A hopper that his biggest cutty took. Several big meaty streamers that fooled some granddaddy brown trout and maybe a pig rainbow or two. A few more flashy streamers that worked on some Pacific Steelhead. A cicada dry fly that a 30 inch brown had gulped down while carp fishing. A few fiddler crab imitations that some Carolina redfish slurped up on the tidal mudflats. Back on the floorboard behind the front seats, there was a 12 gauge pump, rust spots showing on the barrel, uncased. There were some green milk crates full of fishing and camping and hunting gear and zip locks full of shotgun shells, smaller bird shot, double alt buckshot. He could survive for weeks out of that rig.

Driving, like fishing, gave him a space and the time to think. A few weeks before, back in New Bern, home from school, his mother told him, "now Pat, you've got to show a little motivation, you've got to go out, and work hard, and make us proud. You know what Dad always said, the world is your oyster." It wasn't that Pat didn't like to work hard. He enjoyed hard work, breaking a sweat physically or mentally, but lately there had been a lack of motivation. His dad had always used the Army's phrase, the "be all you can be," and had always

said the way to live was to make a positive difference in the lives of others, but lately there had been a lack of drive to live out those words, to be the person they'd wanted him to be. He wanted to live in peace, away, away from it all, minding his own business on a plot of land with a girl and some deer and a garden, and somewhere to fish. The guiding life was a way to do that, he'd started applying to ranches out west, lodges in Alaska, just like Uncle Frank had. He wanted to live for himself, for his own happiness, and was that wrong, he thought? To do your own thing, helping out society be damned?

He passed Arvonia, where his great great-granddaddy had started a slate quarry. Too bad that place didn't get passed down, he thought. Pulling money out of the ground. His other great great-granddaddy had owned a big plantation in Selma… got burned by the bummers following behind Sherman. There was still a distrust of Northerners in his family. One granddad had been a surgeon in Laurinburg, and would take payment in corn and sweet potatoes from the poor farmers, black and white. His dad's dad worked hard, worked up to being a vice president of a tobacco processing company even though he could never afford college. That granddad had once gotten death threats because he stood up for a black man. His dad was a lawyer and a Major in the Army, did pro-bono legal work for vets. Was it wrong to not be ambitious, he thought? Was it selfish to not strive to be the best, to throw elbows climbing up the ladder in law or business or politics or the Army? To not try and make it as far, or further than his dad had? And not only to make it that far, but to help people? To help those who your great-granddaddy may've wronged? Those who may've been in chains, picking in the fields? Was it selfish to not be concerned about helping others out? To live just to live for yourself and live happy? If any of them could say anything, anything at all, he didn't know what it might be.

He got to Gordonsville on Route 15 by 10:00 AM, running on lukewarm gas station coffee and Camel Turkish silvers. Uncle Frank's was only about 40 minutes down the road. He stopped and grabbed a biscuit and a tea at the Biscuit Kitchen. Bacon egg and cheddar cheese, the white flour taking in all the grease. The tea could've passed for syrup. That did the trick, he thought, now I'm ready to fish. Most of the people in there were above 65, overweight, some more than others, and all white except the black lady working the register. The air was greasy. He wolfed the biscuit down and got back on the road.

He hadn't seen Uncle Frank in some time. Not since last Christmas. Frank was his father's brother. Frank was about 55. He went to NC State, graduated sometime in the mid eighties. He bummed around. He fished. His accent was thick with the Southeast, unlike his brother, Pat's father, who had done his best to lose his. He guided in Alaska, for a few years. He wrote about it. He got published a few times in Field and Stream and Gray's Sporting Journal. He now lived in a ranch style tenant house with a small porch on a small plot of land on top of a hill, near Locust Dale, near the Rapidan River, close to where Stonewall Jackson whupped the Yankees at Cedar Mountain. He'd been a bachelor the past 4 years, since his wife left him. The life he led wasn't one of glamour. He looked after peoples' land, worked on their plumbing, worked on their irrigation. He lived off the land as much as he could. He saved money. He saved money, largely for fishing rods and reels and shot shells for hunting season. He loved fishing. He was the person who gave Pat his first fly rod, who showed him how to cast on a farm pond. People like Uncle Frank were a dying breed.

His dad's mother, Na-na, never understood why Frank lived like he did. "Now Pat… you really should think about law school now, like your father, or dental school. My neighbor's daughter took over her daddy's practice - I tell you it's a gold mine. I want what's best for you

son, you can't raise a family living how my Frank does, you can't do much good for this world living like that. You've made us proud, you've got to keep making your daddy proud." Pat didn't know what to do. Should he follow his passions, what he really enjoyed, what he really wanted like Uncle Frank had? Or should he dutifully live out the mold created by the rest of his family?

Red Virginia clay was tracked down most of the two lane, tracked out from the corn fields. When he got to Frank's, it was still crisp, but warmer, and the brown haired but graying Frank, was sitting in a single chair in front of the house, his legs propped up on a sawhorse, his border collie Henry laying by his side in the grass. He wore faded jeans and brown boots. He was reading, and he smoked a Swisher Sweet cigarillo. Pat killed the engine and hopped out.

"This John Gierach's got it made lil' Pat," Frank said as he stood and shook Pat's hand. John Gierach, one of the most notable fly-fishing writers, had been a inspiration for Frank, for Pat too.

"Damn glad to be here Uncle Frank, and yessir, he sure does."

"You know I met the man in Alaska, before he wrote his books. Nicest, most down to earth guy I've ever met. That was back before he wrote *Trout Bum*, his first big one. You need to read it."

"You met him? He sure can write, puts you right in the there in the stream with him."

"I netted a big ol rainbow for him! We was way upriver. Took a floatplane from the lodge, then an old aluminum jon boat with a jet outboard and that doggone thing hauled. I was learning the ropes from this guide, Jackson. Jackson got it up on a plane, "on step" as those guys call it, and it would go through nothin – about three inches of the brown water. But boy that was a big fish, and the big rainbow almost took Gierach to his backing, and the whole time that guide

Jackson was off taking a shit! So Gierach wore him out, I ran on up and scooped him up, and the thing about didn't fit in the net! But damn son, grab you a beer."

"I won't say no to that! Uncle Frank, I'm surprised you didn't stay out there."

"You know it was damn tough, I loved it out there. The hunting and fishing is phenomenal, just out of this world, and you're away from all these damn people getting too worked up about nothing. You know there's just something about the South, Pat, and I had to come on back even if it meant not guiding. Just something about it, I mean the two of us son, we're attached to this place. Our bloods in this dirt we're standing in, been that way since the Revolution, most people just don't get it, coming in here, tearing up the land, they're just laying down concrete everywhere man. It sure won't what it was. Taking my damn money to pay for some inner city school in Richmond. I gave some boy five bucks for a burger the other day, they need to get off my ass. The big cities might as well be Massachusetts these days, tearing up the land and urbanizing, while they claim to be, you know, freakin environmentalists or some shit. Damn hypocrites. But anyway ol Pat, not trying to rant buddy. Grab a beer and lets hit the river. They should be moving now that it's warmed up a bit." Frank was itching to get on the river.

So they rigged up their fly rods, joining the 4 pieces of graphite together at the ferules, making a 9 foot single flexible pole, put on the reels, stripped out the yellow floating fly-line with a clear monofilament leader on the end, and doubled up the fly line and passed it through the guides. They each tied on some reddish-brown crawfish patterns that would sink to the rocky bottom, that would twitch and jump in the current with each strip of the fly line. They put the rods in Frank's old diesel suburban, in some homemade rod holders on the underside of the roof so you didn't have to break down your rod and unrig while you were driving. They threw on their waders, grabbed a few beers, Uncle Frank brought a flask and cigars too, some fresh apples

from his buddy down the road, and Pat grabbed his Levi Garrett from his dashboard. Frank put on his felt cowboy hat with its circular flat brim. It was going to be a good day.

The truck rumbled with that deep diesel sound and shook down the farm road that slowly made it's way down the hill, down towards the river, livestock on either side, grazing, enjoying the sun. The property Uncle Frank lived on and managed went all the way to the Rapidan River. That was why he lived there. That section of river was largely, while not according to the law, his own. People rarely fished it. It was a constantly changing thing with late summer droughts and spring rains, but Frank knew it well. Deep rocky holes, slow bends, thick fallen oaks. All held fish, smallmouth bass, waiting to ambush baitfish, crawfish, or a frog, or even a mouse on the surface.

"Now Pat, what's you plan for after school? You trying to go back out West again?"

"Yeah Uncle Frank, I've been meaning to talk to you about it… I loved it out there, out there in Wyoming. It's just such a free place, and I mean, hell, it's pretty free out here too. But I just don't know, I feel like I've been given so much, and that I should do something with it. But I sure would love to guide like you did, live off the land like you do now."

"Well Pat, I'll tell you what happened with me. I went out there after school, and I about never came back. It's not all it looks like, and I'm sure you know… it's hard damn work. But it can sure be rewarding, I was always so proud when I told somebody something, when I taught them something, and they used it to catch a fish. That's impacting them in a good way. It's a life that'll choose you, you don't choose it." Pat just nodded in response, nodded as they drove.

Frank broke the silence. "Caught a nice one on top the other week during that warm spell, down in that bend where you got your big bass a few years back. We won't start there, but we'll work our way down."

"What'd he take? Diver?"

"That's the one. They love that movement, looks just like a struggling baitfish. Maybe it'll warm up enough for 'em to look up top."

Pat had only fished there with Frank a few times, but he'd caught the biggest smallmouth he had ever caught there, on the fly too. A 19 incher. Most of the bigger bass were downstream, close to the convergence with the Rappahannock, but there were still a few big ones further upstream near Locust Dale.

The rutted clay of the farm road disappeared as the pasture turned to a thick block of hardwoods that bordered the river. They hopped out, and Frank led the way towards a thin path through the trees, careful not to slip in his felt soled wading boots on the fallen leaves and acorns.

"Now Pat, here you take this stretch. Fish downstream - you know what you're doing. I'll be down around the bend, I ain't as fast as you buddy. Lets see if we can't snag us a bronze-back or two."

"Yessir that sounds good. Any deep holes I need to worry about?"

"Naw, you should be good, but I have been known to forget about one or two once and a while!" Uncle Frank said with a deep chuckle.

"Well if I find one, I'll let you know Uncle… might need a slug of whiskey to warm up! Lets catch some fish."

They were happy. They were in their element. They were on the river left side - facing downstream they stood on the left bank. Pat sidestepped down a sort of path down the steep mud bank, characteristic of rivers that often flood, careful to not catch his rod on briars or branches. Before stepping in, disturbing the water, he surveyed the area closest to him, the way Frank had

taught him, making sure there wasn't a fish right there. There wasn't, so he eased in, cool water that had first been rained down in the Shenandoah rising up almost to his waist, pressing the thin waders to his legs. After wading out a bit, he stripped enough line off the reel, and using largely shoulder and little wrist, he raised the rod tip into the air and sent the fly line back in a back cast, waited for the line to extend back behind him in the air, and then sent it forward with the help of the flex in the rod. He false casted, casting in the air like that, and it felt pure and good, effortless, feeling the rod load and flex with the force of the line, and feeling the line shoot out through the guides, slowly getting more and more fly line out in front of him in the air, and on the final cast he sent the line forward, and as he extended his shoulder forward the line rolled out, about 45 degrees off directly downriver, river right, no more than 2 feet off the far bank. He slowly lowered the rod tip. He stripped in line with his left hand, one long strip, pause, two short, pause. The fish would take the fly on the pause. Nothing yet. He stripped several more times, irregularly with pauses in between, mimicking a swimming crayfish down deep, swimming through the rocks. Strip, Strip, Pause. Strip, Pause. Boom. There was a fierce tug on the line, the rod came to life, bent over, the thin upper section shaking with energy transferred from the fish, through the line, to the rod, to Pat.

"Yeah buddy! Keep that rod tip up!" Frank had been watching the whole time, up from the bank. The joy he got from seeing somebody who he'd taught to fish get a fish on the line showed. The bass was chunky but wasn't too big, and after a minute or two and a few jumps Pat brought him to hand, pulled out the hook, and released him, the spots of green and brown on his back quickly camouflaged the fish in the clear water.

"That a boy!"

"You knew he was in there didn't you?"

"I mighta had a hunch!"

Pat pulled out his pouch of chew from the front pocket of his flannel shirt and wedged a plug between the back of his lower jaw and his cheek. He watched Frank walk off, down the path, following the river downstream, around the bend, out of sight. Frank knew when to let people be when they were fishing. Frank knew fishing was sometimes about good times with your buddies and friends, but sometimes it was about solitude. Fishing let you be totally consumed with the cast, the retrieve, the fish. But sometimes, simultaneously, the solitude and the repetition of it all allowed you to think elsewhere, to clear everything non-important from your head.

Pat had to spit out a bit of stringy stem, but he let the thick sweet molasses and tobacco juice gather in his cheek before spitting into the stream, the bubbling faster water of the current seam carrying the sweet brown juice away. A small bream or bluegill nipped at it as it drifted down. This was where he was happy. This is what made him happy. Could he make his life out of it? Teaching and guiding? Guides still made a difference in this world, he thought. This was a place where he could get away, and sometimes you had to get away to really be able to think. He needed a clear head.

He waded to a big boulder in the stream, and he sat and felt the sun's warmth on it and he looked out across the riffles in the water and he thought. Around the bend, where Frank had gone, he remembered there was the remnants of old railroad bridge, a bridge that had been around since the Civil War, Frank had told him. They used that railroad to carry troops up from Richmond. The bridge had collapsed, but the stone pillars and supports remained, three quarters of the way submerged by the river. Was it wrong to live like Frank, getting by comfortably enough, but living maybe too much for himself? Frank had no direct family, he had done little to

help people who needed it, although Pat supposed a fishing guide could be like a psychologist or therapist sometimes. Frank lived off the land as much as you could without being in the Alaskan bush. Frank was a proud white Southerner, but if he felt any of the complexities of being one he didn't show it. Here, this land, close to this river, was a place where his ancestors, some with slaves, some without, fought and died. Was living like Frank wrong if Pat couldn't make a big difference in the world? Pat thought that he held the most interesting struggle there was thanks to his heritage – between being proud of the good, but what to do about all the bad? Shouldn't he be the one to try make a difference in the lives of those people his great granddaddy may've owned? As a legislator, a public defender? Anything but a fishing guide?

This sure is a peaceful place, Pat thought, spitting again, again watching the sweet molasses float and swirl downstream. "I mean, damn, I just don't know," he murmured out loud, the way you sometimes talk out loud to yourself when you're out on your own away from everything and no one can hear you but you don't care. He remembered Nick Adams doing the same thing, out in the Michigan woods, in one of Hemingway's stories. He looked downstream, remembering the old bridge.

"I'll bet there's a pig of a fish up next to that old structure," he said. "Uncle Frank's going to catch him a big one."

He remembered when he was little, watching those movies like "Gettysburg" and "Gods and Generals" and the pride he felt when he felt himself there, imagining charging across the field. He remembered the rough wood of the toy muskets, a gray felt hat, and what it felt like to run uphill, no cover, towards that stone wall, imaginary Yankees behind. But back then he was too young to fully comprehend the whole story. He now knew firsthand that enough education brought out a sort of coming of age for a southern boy, a realization where you learn that the

cause that your ancestors may have fought for was forever stained in the complications of Southern-ness. The racism. The hypocrisy. He couldn't really think like that unless he was away from things. So what should be do? Things were cloudy back home, back in New Bern, back in the roar of everyday life, back in the race to earn money, back with his family pushing him towards falling into the same dutiful mold as most men in his family had except for Frank. Everything was clearer out here, like the water of the stream.

The plug was done, dried up. There wasn't much spit left in his mouth, so he pulled out the dark plug with a hooked finger and chunked it, it landing with a simple plop in the middle of the stream, sinking. He was torn. Between an intense force drawing him toward wild places, but clashing with another pulling him to do some good for somebody, for everyone he could. He stood on the rock, made a few more casts, a few more retrieves, differing the speed and cadence of the strips. Nothing. He'd give this stretch a break and hop out and walk downstream down the path toward Uncle Frank, he thought. He'd crack a beer, cooled by the stream, drinking as he walked. He'd watch Uncle Frank, watch him cast, that cast a work of art in itself. An effortless thing of beauty. He'd see if Frank couldn't pull a big smallie out of that deep water by the old bridge.

And that was what he did. The beer was cold, refreshing, the leaves crunching under his boots along the path. He saw the old bridge, and he sat on a log and watched Frank, unnoticed. Frank stood on a gravel bar, river left, cool water of the stream rushing past his boots. Downstream of the bar was the steep drop off, the deep water, and the old bridge. Frank stood, facing downstream, observing, rod under his arm, pointed upstream. He smoked a cigarillo, smoke rising up, fanning out from his felt brimmed hat. He was totally enveloped by the river,

its feel, its sounds, the flash of a fish moving, feeding. Patience was what he had. Frank stood and observed and smoked until his cigarillo was done. He looked at peace.

Pat sat, and drank his beer, and he thought. What was the point of striving on, miserably, if the life his family wanted held nothing for him? He could still help people, but in a different kind of way. As long as he was helping somebody. He was not bound to public service in Craven County, his dad and granddad surely had repaid his family's debts. His life was his for him to live. The river was for him, out here, out there, out west, not a Raleigh law firm or the Greenville Courthouse. Duty be damned.

Dunbar

The spray was dark and cold and salty and it stung until Phil Dunbar couldn't feel his face. A face stubbled with the start of a beard and weathered from the cigarettes and the sun. One eye looked straight ahead, the other wandered somewhere off to starboard. Through his feet, in his rubber boots, he could feel the throbbing rumble of Cummings diesel, down below, amidships. He stood further aft, stacks of lobster pots behind him, three rows deep and five high, you couldn't even see the beaten fiberglass transom though the hard plastic chain-link type lattice of all the traps. The fog was thick. It was late fall in Frenchman Bay, when the lobster were starting to move out, out offshore.

They had to move their traps out from the shallower, protected summering grounds, to where the lobsters largely now were. At 5:30 A.M Phil and Joey, the two mates, had launched the 16-foot fiberglass flat bottom skiff, loaded with traps, old mercury outboard coming to life on the third pull, off the beach of sea smoothed gravel. The temperatures would hover around the mid 30's all day, water temps in the low 40's. It wouldn't take long to become hypothermic once you fell in. Dickie was captain. It was his boat, the blue hulled "Kimberly Sue," a classic Down East

Lobster boat. Inherited from his father. She was a '34, with a high bow, flared out to block the waves, with a small cuddy cabin and the helm shielded from the wind and spray above and to port, but not to starboard, a wood spindled wheel on starboard. An exhaust pipe ran straight up on port out of the cabin, like a 18 wheeler's, billowing black diesel smoke. The fog was thick and cold, so thick you couldn't see 30 yards in front of you, but they knew this bay, they knew it well. The tide was in, high, high enough so they cut through the rocky mass known collectively as Porky's Rock. Forever named after Bobby McLaughlin, "Porky", when he sunk his boat on it in the 80's. Dickie masterfully piloted them through the narrow rocky channel, through the fog, a shortcut around a sort of rocky underwater peninsula. To go all the way around was another 3 miles.

It had snowed the week before. It was late fall in Frenchman Bay, and all Phil could think about was playing golf. Out on the green Blink Bonnie. Its lush mossy fairways, links style, if you hooked or sliced you'd never find that ball. Dunbar imagined it to be like Scotland, probably the closest he'd ever get to the land of his ancestors. Hole Number 3 looked out over Flanders Bay, it was beauty if he ever saw it. Except for the 20 or so families of summer people down the road, down the peninsula, down by the town dock, the tourists were few, and every Wednesday night he and his buddies would meet at the old pro shop, drink a few tailgate beers, smoke a cig, and hit the links. It only cost 10 bucks to play the 9 holes, not too shabby in Phil's book. Sometimes he'd take little Sharron out there, and he was no pro, but he had his own self-taught style, and he'd show his young daughter how to swing, how to putt. He missed his daughter. He missed those warm Maine summers.

Metallica was cranked up on the stereo, that heavy rock echoing out into the fog, and the boat kept plowing through the freezing chop of the bay, now starting to feel the roll of the swell from

the sea. The fog was still thick, maybe even thicker with the wind coming more out of the north, northeast. Joey finished lashing the traps, and turned to Phil. Joey had his hair buzzed, always had since Desert Storm, and the outline of his belly shown through the heavy duty orange rubber Grunden's coveralls that he and each of the men wore. Phil was thin as a rail, and Dickie was somewhere in between the two. What could be seen of Joey's bearded face was red from the almost everyday drinking and the cold windburn.

"It's fuckin' cold Dickie! Pass me a smoke, eh?" Phil yelled in that strong Down East dialect, a gruffer, smokier version of Boston's. A hint of Scottish or Irish, almost like the High Tiders of the Outer Banks of Carolina. Dickie casually tossed the pack of menthols to Phil, only slightly turning from his station at the helm, intent on keeping the bow steady on the compass heading, pushing through the cold dark chop. Phil grabbed two, lit one, tucked the other behind his ear, halfway hidden by his scraggly mullet of a haircut coming out of his baseball hat. The cool smoke was soothing. The men were in their late 40's or 50's, all friends. Dickie, Joey, Phil, all old friends since high school, when the school was still there in Sullivan. These days kids had to ride close to an hour on the bus to go to school in Ellsworth. These days everybody just seemed to be scraping by in Hancock County Maine. Phil had owned a grocery once, "Dunbar's", a small country store on Route 1, and he had done well enough, supported by the locals and the summer people, enough to be comfortable, but it was gone now. It was lobster or crank or heroin in those cold dark months.

"Well it's a damn fine day on the bay Phil," Joey said with a gruff chuckle.

"Spectacular weather, spectacular," Phil replied, holding his "r's" in true Mainer fashion. They squinted through the dark spray and fog. It wouldn't be a flat ride. There wasn't much to do before they got to the waypoints Dickie had mapped out, past Halibut Hole, a good 8 miles from

Sorrento Harbor, across the bay and out into the open ocean, 6 more to go. They'd baited up the pots with herring, checked the lines and buoys, it was a waiting game. Joey pulled out a water bottle full of whiskey.

"'ey Phil, 'ol Dickie isn't looking, take a pull." He did and so did Joey, and the whiskey was bad but at least it was temporarily warming with that satisfying burn down his throat. The two just looked out into the cold fog and waited. The monotony of the diesel's rumble, and the crash of the spray was, in a way, calming. It sure was cold, it sure didn't pay great with low prices of lobster those days from the high supply, but it was nice. Hell, what else was there to do, Phil thought. He wouldn't go down the road of his dead wife, his daughter.

He remembered little Sharron when she was little, pretty blonde hair. Business had been good. He hadn't had to work on a boat in years. He'd bought her one of those pink little electric jeeps. She loved that damn thing, he thought. He remembered her driving that thing around in the mossy green front yard in the summer sun. His wife, Melissa, was happy. She hadn't touched the stuff in years, not since the bad old days before Phil had earned enough to buy the store, back when he worked on the boat for day's wages. She was done with it, she'd said, done with that crank, those drugs and she started working the register at the store so Phil could better manage the business. They'd sit on the lawn chairs, watching Sharron drive around in pure joy. Things were good, he was close to having enough money for a new bigger house, one with a heated garage.

But before he knew it things got darker. Business slowed in the recession, money got tight. He'd borrowed a bit too much, they'd had to downsize back to a trailer. He thought it was like somebody just flipped a switch in Melissa's head. It came out of nowhere as some things do, like those short dark days of Maine winter got trapped in her head. Before he knew it she was

back on the needle, barely home, barely around. Phil didn't know what to say to Sharron. Before he knew it, his wife was gone, and he'd tried, tried hard, but he just couldn't break in to that head of hers. She just left, never to be seen again. But that was a few years past, and yet now, it seemed, things had a way of repeating themselves. Maybe he could've done more for Sharron, but it was hard, when the kid's mother was nowhere to be found, when Phil was breaking his back trying to save a failing store, a store that Melissa had probably been stealing money from. He remembered Sharron starting high school, joining the cheerleading squad, how proud he was, and he tried to show it with a pink cell phone or a knockoff mp3 player. But it wasn't enough. She was itching to get away. Maybe, Phil thought, the only escape she could find was ingrained in her head, passed down from her mother, partying back in the dark Maine woods. At first there was just liquor and a little weed, but things got more serious with needles and glass, more re-occurring, and soon enough, like her mother, Sharron had dropped out and ran off with a boy to the outskirts of Bangor. He was going to find her, bring her back. He knew that she knew in her heart, that her mother's path was not the one to take. He longed for those warm summer days, little Sharron, the green links, fairways kept a bit rough and the rough rougher, a drug-free Melissa. That was a long time gone these days, but it was clear as gin in Phil's head.

Joey broke the relative silence, or at least the monotonous rumble of the engine after Dickie had turned down the radio.

"Phil, it's good to have ya back here on the boat. We fellas sure have missed ya over here."

"Yeah, it sure is Joey buddy, it sure is. Wouldn't trade it in for nothing."

"Damn shame about the store, Phil, damn shame is what it is. Now we all've got to run to Ellsworth to the Wal-mart. How is Sharron doin'?"

"I appreciate ya askin' Joey. You know I haven't seen her in some time. Last I heard she was in Bangor. Last thing I wanted was for her to end up like her mother."

"You know how it is these days Phil, you've just got to hunker down, hunker down like the Nor'easter's coming, and keep chugging along."

"Yea, that's why we're out here, eh? We'll be back out on the links soon enough."

Dickie chimed in, "Boys, we're passin' Bar Harbor, can't see it in this damn fog, we'll be there in 40. We'll throw 'em out and head home for today."

"We getting paid today Captain? Or we going to have to make you swim back?" Joey jokingly asked.

"Ha! Best of luck carrying out a mutiny on my boat, Joey. I've got your cash in the truck. We'll stop by the Galley on the drive back. They're open on Tuesday nights, pizza, cheap beers and alcohol."

"Well yes sir Mr. Captain sir," Joey said with a smile.

The swell was even stronger, but nothing out of the ordinary, and as the *Kimberly Sue* boat passed through the Mt. Desert Narrows, the channel through a string of small rocky, evergreen covered islands - Porcupine, Sheep, the Hop - she rose up, lifted with the roll of the swell, and fell as it passed. Out beyond was the dark blue of the open ocean, and before Phil knew it, it was 10 AM, and they'd passed the deep point marked Halibut Hole on the map. It was all deep water- some 50 feet in the harbor itself, more than 100 in the bay, but even deeper out here, maybe 300 or more. The fog had started to be swept off by the stronger open ocean winds. It was still gray, there was no sun, but it was brighter. The boat was out of the all-enveloping sea of fog, beyond the sight of land, but the wind was starting to blow.

"Ok boys, we're about at my mark, lets throw 'em out." Dickie pulled back on the throttle, leaving enough power to keep bow into the increasingly bigger but not yet quite threatening waves.

Joey would throw the heavily weighted trap, letting a bit of line run over the gunwale into the sea, and Phil would throw the rest of the line, coiled, along with the hard foam buoy, painted the distinctive way that that all Captain Dickie's traps were. The boat rising and falling, moving forward, but with a slight roll from side to side. The men keeping their stance wide, stabilizing.
"'ey ya Dickie, it sure has breezed up, hope your bilge pump is working strong" Joey said.
"You know it Joey, shut your face, and get the rest of those traps out before I throw you out," he said with a grin.
"Ha! Don't you jinx us Joey!" Phil said.

Dickie would mark on his GPS, marking the general area of where his traps were on the off white blinking screen. Throwing out the traps wasn't bad, Phil, thought, it was a calming, thoughtless task. He could get lost in the repetitiveness. In his head he was back, way back with Sharron in the warm sun.

"That's the last of them Dickie," Joey said

"Good, good fellas. Boys we've better start heading back to shore. Might be some weather blowing in."

"Well get us back Dickie, You promised us some grub at the Galley didn't you?"

"That I did, that I did, now make sure everything's stowed and secured. Might be a little rougher ride on the way in fellas." The sky was darkening, a real dark, more dark than gray, and it got dark quick. Squalls come out of nowhere, seas rise, winds whip up into a frenzy. They should've noticed it sooner. They all knew it.

Phil knew this could happen, he knew it. But he'd always had a sense that it wouldn't, that if the weather blew up, they'd get back, they'd get back fine. He'd find his daughter, he'd get her out of that shit. He'd get back on the links, on the Blink Bonnie. He'd get back to that summer warmth soon enough.

Dickie turned up the radio all the way, more heavy metal, gripping the wheel in his left hand, throttle in his right. As the wave's rising momentum started to be felt in the bow, Dickie gave her some gas, to keep the boat plowing ahead, through the waves, growing taller and taller. Phil smoked viciously, one hand hanging on to the roof of the hard top of the cabin. Joey, offered a slug to the other two, and finished off his whiskey, almost three fourths of the bottle, without a wince. They braced themselves against the waves as the *Kimberly Sue* crashed through one, then another, then another, at full steam. The diesel engine was doing all it could in the building seas.

"You going to radio the Coast Guard Dickie?" Joey said.

"You calling me a pussy, Joey? Fuck no. We've made it out of worse squalls than this."

"How about another smoke Dickie? I'd like another before I go for a swim," Phil joked. His small frame shivered in his rubber coveralls, wet and cold. Damn it's cold, he thought.

"Come up here and grab one yourself." Dickie said with a wave of his hand, the other gripped on the wheel, making second by second adjustments. It was really blowing now, now the tops of the crests of the waves starting to break over the high bow, water rushing down, back past their boots, most out the drainage holes in the transom, but a some running down into the bilge, building up, adding weight.

"I sure hope your bilge is pumping like you said Dickie," Joey said.

"Shut your face Joey."

Minutes felt more like hours, hours like forever. They were making progress, but the squall was still building. They were getting closer and closer, but the seas didn't let up. It was like the fast moving squall was following them, following them all the way back into the bay. It was dark and cold and relentless. It sure was relentless, Phil thought, just like the drugs' pull on his wife, now on his daughter. All around was dark waves, and gray.

"Thank God for the GPS fellas," Dickie said, "I hadn't relied just on a compass and a map in a while now,"

"Well damn glad it's working Dickie"

It was sometime around 3, and finally they began to pass back through the Mt. Desert Narrows, they knew where the hull crushing, hull puncturing rocks were – Jack's Ledge, the Three sisters, the single rock off Porcupine, in-between the island and the red nun that marked it. The seas were still high, even through narrows, even into the relative protection of the bay. Visibility was still close to zero, they still couldn't see much at all. They were still taking on a bit of water, but that shouldn't be a problem, Phil thought.

"Alright boys, home stretch. Hope my damn traps haven't drifted too far."

It was another 5 miles across the bay, back to the harbor. The cold had worn through everything, all of Phil's clothes, every single layer. Dickie pushed down the throttle, all out, it wouldn't be long. Almost back, Phil thought. A warm truck, warm clothes, some whiskey with that sweet burn. Some hot soup, or pizza, or anything really, Phil didn't care. The waves crashed strong, some of the water over the bow. There didn't seem to be a dry place on that boat. The boat pushed through the waves, through the chop, but the boat felt heavier, slower.

"Hey Phil, open the hatch and check down below, something doesn't feel right." Dickie yelled over the sea. When Phil opened the hatch, he looked back at Dickie and Joey, back

towards the helm, and they all knew. They didn't have to hear the sloshing of the cold salty water, inside the hull, getting close to drowning out the diesel, flooding the motor. Fuck, Phil thought. He knew it could happen, but never thought it would.

"Shit!" Dickie said. "You fucking jinxed us Joey!" The boat was, without a doubt, taking on water. How'd it go unnoticed, Phil thought. Just like the squall sneaking up on them. Fuck. They were almost to Porky's Rock, the seas hadn't gone down. If anything they'd gotten worse. The squall had blown out the fog, but visibility was just as bad, now. The boat had that heavy lift and roll and fall, almost uncontrollable, with the tide and chop and the squall's winds all combined.

"Well I'm a fucking pussy! God damn it." Dickie got on the radio, turning the VHF to channel 16. "MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY… This is the *Kimberly Sue*, call sign Yankee… MAYDAY this is the *Kimberly Sue*…44.4 degrees North, 68.1 degrees West…just off Porky's Rock…We're takin' on water, three men on board… OVER."

Dickie tried three more times. No reply. They might've heard, Phil hoped, maybe we just can't receive the signal. But who knows, he thought.

"Fuckin' fuck!" Dickie yelled. Things were getting worse, and quick. The boat was getting battered from all sides,

"Boys, where the fuck are the life jackets?" They scrambled, trying to find them, some form of flotation. Even though they wouldn't do much good in the icy bay. They all knew what Dickie was almost to suggest.

"Fellas, I've got to tell you, don't think we can make it around the rock.
I think the tide's come back in enough, back high enough to go over Porky's Rock. Let's vote it. I say go for it."

"Your call Captain Dickie," Joey said.

"We ain't making it around are we?" Phil said. Dickie nodded. It was that bad. Steam was rising off the roaring diesel engine, it wouldn't be long. The water was rising, the seas weren't going down. I've got to make it back, Phil thought. Dickie can do it, he's done it before, Phil hoped. He knew.

So they went for it. Like they'd done a thousand times. But, they went for it. All it took was a miscalculation, a mistaken estimate of how high the tide was. Dickie was a master pilot. He knew these rocks, the twists and turns of the shallow, narrow channel. There was the roar of the diesel, the boat gathering speed, faster and faster, Dicky trying to weave the boat through the channel in his mind, but that channel in his mind didn't match with the real one, the boat forced off course with the wind and waves. The diesel roared, so did the wind, until there was a crunch. The crunch of fiberglass, wood frame beneath, the crunch of the boat crashing into some part of Porky's Rock at full steam, at full throttle, the old hull splintering. It was thick but not thick enough. Water rushing in, about to overtake the Cumming's Diesel. The boat lowering. The gunwales closer and closer to the crashing waves. The weather howled, whipping past them, but it was quiet in Phil's mind. The boat was pinned against the submerged rocks. The cold dark waves about to come over the low transom in the stern. Dickie tried to reverse hard, but the force of the water and waves were too much, the boat was getting battered, being pushed off the submerged rock with every crash of the sea, into the deeper water. In seconds the boat was getting lower and lower, more and more submerged. More and more waves rushed over the gunwale. Fuck, Phil thought, but what was there to do? On a calm summer day, you could see the harbor from there. You could maybe swim it if you were strong, on a summer day.

Soon a monstrous wave crashed over the transom, crashing the three men into the helm, drowning out the motor. Phil lay there, crumpled with the rest of them, on the deck, cold, freezing, in his coveralls, soaked. How could we let this happen, Phil thought. How could this happen, we've run this rock a million times? What the fuck is Sharron going to do? She's going to come home. She's going to come home, and will I be there? It was a feeling of helplessness, the most helpless he'd ever felt. All he could think about were those summer days, with Sharron, with the Blink Bonnie, the warmth.

They sat, in silence. In a defeat. They were all defeated. Hoping for the Coast Guard, or for a buddy listening in on the radio. But they knew it would likely be the icy bay to get to them first, to crash over them, pulling the boat down, leaving them alone in the cold. They knew they wouldn't last long. Dickie was silent, grave, staring off into the gray. Phil knew Dickie was blaming himself for letting it happen, but there weren't any guarantees about going around the rock. They all knew there wasn't anything that could be done. Joey spoke.

"Phil, you remember that day, a few years back on the Blink Bonnie, we was on hole 7, the short one. And, you overshot the green, your ball was down behind, on the hill, in that tall grass. That incline right behind the green was so steep you could barely stand on in. And you fuckin' chipped it in Phil! It didn't even touch the flag, just went right in. I'd never seen a thing like it. Not in my whole life."

"I won't ever forget that shot Joey. I won't forget winning your five bucks neither! When we get back, I'm buying you a whisky, you damn *alkie*."

"I ain't no damn alkie, I only drink about 10 beers every day!"

They could feel the boat being pulled off the rock, inch by inch. They were quiet, and the boat was sinking, faster with every second. What was there to do? Phil thought of Sharron. He

imagined her in the worse sort of way, but he muscled that out of his head. He thought of her back in those sunny days, and he hoped she'd see him on the news, on some small blurry TV in the trailer, and he hoped she'd quit her ways and go back to school, marry somebody from Portland with money, get the hell out of here. He wished he could do something. He'd tried, he'd tried, but that cold Maine bay was about to pull him in. The frigid spray was getting stronger and stronger, water rushing up the deck, from the stern, towards them.

"Well, it's a damn fine day on the bay eh Phil?" Joey said.

"You're damn right… Hey Dickie! Pass me a smoke."

Bluefish for Breakfast

I'm not asking ya'll to fully understand what it was like growing up hunting and fishing in Eastern North Carolina. But it was great. It's something I really am thankful for.

It was cold and dark. There was that nip in the salty morning air that tells you its hunting season. The flame from the propane burner and the hot oil just starting to pop and bubble in the charred aluminum fish fryer would only momentarily warm my hands. My little brother and I stood around the burner. When the thermometer read 350, I dropped in two lightly breaded bluefish filets, trying not splash the oil. The cold filets sank in the hot oil. A few minutes later they floated to the surface, the breader crusted into that gold brown characteristic of most fried food. We ate them and they were darn good. If we had more time, I'd maybe've fried up an egg to go with it.

Lot of people don't like bluefish. Too oily. Too fishy. The simple trick of slicing off that oily layer of skin isn't well known I guess. We always've loved catching them in the surf

when they run down the coast later in the fall. And we always've loved cooking them up for breakfast during duck season.

We'd gotten up a bit earlier so we could fry the fish and we ate around 5. We had to be out at Oakley by 6, shooting time was at 6:45. I was all layered up, but I still had the heat cranked in that paint chipped rusted out truck I'd just bought after getting my license. Layers are key. Cotton socks, wool socks, long johns, a t-shirt, a LL Bean chamois shirt, a pair of jeans or Carhartts, maybe a vest, dad's old wool army sweater, then a "water resistant" camo jacket with big pockets and a hood. Your neoprene waders would cover most of that, from your feet to your chest. Trudging out to a blind in a flooded field, or to a wooded beaver pond, loaded with maybe a dozen and a half battered decoys, some shells, and your gun on a sling on your shoulder. Your waders keep you warm, but you have to keep lifting your feet and shins through that muck and grass and sometimes millet or rice or flooded corn. You're already breaking a sweat when you get to where you're going, and you still got to put out the decoys. You throw them out one by one, taking the wind direction into account and trying to leave an opening for birds to land in the group of plastic, foam filled ducks. Once they're out you'll probably move them around too, trying to get that perfect decoy spread that'll convince the birds to land, or at least take a closer look. After that you sit and wait. In the freezing cold icy murky water. All that sweat gets damn cold quick. Being able to peel off a layer or two makes this not quite as miserable. Layers are better than no layers.

With our decoys and our guns in the truck we hauled through the salty dark away from the beach, across the intra-coastal, towards Castle Hayne and the Northeast Cape Fear. In our grogginess we didn't really talk much. Past some trailers with a bunch of junk cars, a collapsing produce stand, and an out of business seafood market, we took our turn. It was a dirt and gravel

trail. The trail though some pines turned into a causeway just wide enough for a truck, tidal salt marsh on our left, fresh water swamp and flooded timber on our right. Around 6 we got to the Judge's old A-frame cabin, on a sort of peninsula surrounded by wooded swamp and rice fields and canals and the dikes that separated Oakley Plantation from the Cape Fear.

The Judge was then, and still is, sort of like an adopted granddad for me and my brother. Never knew Dad's dad and barely knew Mom's. I don't know how many times he's invited us to duck hunt at his old rice plantation, but it's been a bunch. The old man was in his late 70's or 80's at the time and is the closest thing to the most idealized Southern gentleman I've ever met. The Judge is that good Southern-ness that seems to be blotted out by all the bad. By slavery. By racism. Out there, at Oakley, you can almost hear the slaves digging out the rice fields, building up the dikes that keep out the Cape Fear's tidal salt. It isn't a "plantation" now, but some of the fields and dikes are still around, and some rice still grows on its own. Having helped him with projects out there in the summer, with the mosquitos and the gators and the cottonmouths, I feel damn sorry for those African slaves. The Judge is an adopted granddad in the way that in the South, a good family friend might be a "uncle" to a young boy, might be a mentor, someone who takes him hunting and fishing and teaches him about working on engines. The Judge has taught me a bunch, from calling ducks to woodworking, but what's really stuck are two things, honor and that you work *with* people, they don't work *for* you. It didn't matter if it was his Harvard educated law clerk, or James, the black guy who helped him out at Oakley.

Anyway, at the Judge's cabin I gave him a firm handshake and a fifth of rum I'd gotten my mom to buy. Me and my brother caught up real quick with the Judge's son-in law, Jay Jordan, and his 3 grandsons, who were in their mid twenties to thirties. The usual how's everything going, how y'all doing kind of thing. Jokes about that hunt when Dad and Smith shot

two boxes of shells only to bring back one fish duck. My brother and I were the only two who weren't technically part of the family. We always have kind of been family, in the sort of way that close family friends are. But ever since a few years before when Dad passed away, we were more than that.

Jay Jordan told us where we were going and we went. We took Fred, the Judge's old black lab. He had a good bit of gray on his muzzle, but still excitedly trotted ahead of us. He knew where we were going. We got to the "woods pond" with about 45 minutes till shooting time. Any time of year besides cold duck season you wouldn't want to be in there. Gators love it. It's not really a pond, just a pretty open area in the flooded timber. Cold dark black water and cypress trees with Spanish moss and their damn cypress knees that I've tripped over too many times.

We put our dad's old decoys in the open area, about 25 yards out from where the wooded timber started to get thick. I waded carefully, hoping to avoid any holes left by old trees where the water would go over my head. The decoys didn't look much like the ducks they were trying to imitate. Greenheads. Woodies. Teal. Most of the paint that was still there was faded and dull and chipped. I posted up against an old cypress, and my brother did the same some 10 yards to the left. I got Fred to sit and stay on a mound of vegetation that kept him out of the water. The decoys were out in front. The dark water was up to my mid thigh and the neoprene didn't do that much to cut the cold. Even though the inside of my waders was dry because I didn't trip this time. The wooden blind that used to be in there was gone thanks to a September hurricane. It was 6:30. Shooting time was 6:45, 30 minutes before sunrise. We sat and we waited.

At 6:38 we heard the *wheeeeek, wheeeek* of wood ducks flying through the trees in the swamp not too far off. It's the sort of sound that gets to most East Coast duck hunters, whose

first duck hunt was probably in a flooded beaver pond, and the only ducks you'd see would be the wood ducks in that gray just about sunrise light. It's the sound that makes you open and close your fist to keep blood flowing through your trigger finger so it isn't too numb to painfully press down the safety then place it above the trigger guard. At 6:40 we heard shots that must've come from the edge of the Judge's property. Everybody knew about Oakley. It was prime waterfowl habitat, one of the few places with that combination of being untouched enough from development, but maintained enough by the Judge, to be a duck haven. And I had to admit, if I wasn't lucky enough to be invited out there by the Judge a fair amount, I'd maybe think about doing exactly what a bunch of guys did. If the tide was high enough, water would go all the way up to the dikes that were the property line of the Judge's land. They'd motor up the Cape Fear in a johnboat, and navigate the muddy, oyster-lined creeks until they were right beside Oakley. They'd maybe throw out a handful of decoys, but mainly just hope for a passing shot as birds would fly into the Judge's land, or away from it. It wasn't trespassing, but they always seemed to shoot more than a few minutes early, even right beside land owned by a judge.

A minute till shooting time, a pair of woodies, silent except for that rush of fluttering wings that gets your adrenaline going, wove through the trees and flew right over us. They lit right in the decoys. As still as possible, I'd look at the two, a drake and a hen, swimming, bobbing their heads, dabbling at duckweed and diving for acorns. Then I'd look at the minute hand on my watch. You never shoot ducks on the water unless they've been winged with a few pellets and are still swimming around. Then it was shooting time. We were legal. I heard more woodies through the trees and whispered to my brother.

"Birds. Left"

I saw them. Three woodies. Weaving through the trees damn fast. In a second they had their wings out, slowing them like flaps on a plane, and their webbed feet down, pointing towards the opening in our decoy spread.

"Take 'em"

Your blood's pumping and after you've pushed off the safety, you raise you gun to your shoulder and you lower your trigger finger into the trigger guard. You choose a bird, preferably the drake, put the bead on his head then move a bit ahead to lead him. You pull the trigger, the muzzle jumps a bit and a flash brightens the gray semi-darkness. You keep the gun moving, to follow through on the shot, almost like a golf swing. The size 3 steel shot rips through the air, the spread of pellets constricted by the choke at the muzzle end of the barrel. At 30 yards the spread's about the size of a 30-inch circle. You see the bird crumple and fall and splash into the water. You check to make sure there aren't any more birds coming in, and then you tell the dog to fetch. He soars through the air and splashes into the water. He uses his tail as a rudder as he swims towards the bird, and he grabs the bird in his mouth and swims back and drops it beside you. You give him a loving pat on the head and his tail's up and wagging. He lives for this moment. It's a drake. It's got that distinctive green crested head with a hint of purple, and a brown burgundy chest with white specks. It's got to be one of the prettiest ducks there is.

We bagged those two birds. I didn't even notice the first pair fly off. Our two shots were the first two on the property. After that, there was excited shooting in the rice field and then the millet field. I didn't see anything for a few minutes then heard some mallards. Then I saw them, still fast, but not like the woodies. Not weaving through the trees. Five beating black dots, high, way out past the trees. They got closer and made a high pass, then circled, checking out the decoys. They circled again, lower this time. But right before they would've dropped in to land,

they saw something they didn't like, and kept flying. Maybe I should've tried a few raspy notes on my double reed mallard call.

After that there wasn't much action besides some distant shooting far off the property. It was surprising. There was a cold breeze that should've made ducks have to move to keep their body temperature up in their morning search for food. It was cloudy, which should've kept the birds low. And it wasn't too cold. There weren't those sub-freezing temperatures which would freeze everything up. But, for whatever the reason, there just weren't many birds moving.

My brother and I ended up just with those two woodies. We could've stayed out there longer and maybe had a shot at some late fliers, but the Judge liked everyone to be in by 8:30 or so. I admired him for that, his desire to not pressure the land, to not pressure the ducks. We picked up the decoys, dreading each wet and cold wrap of the line and small lead anchor around the decoy's keel. With all our gear and our birds we trudged back through the swamp, then down the sandy trail to the Judge's cabin. Fred didn't want to leave, but he followed. We were the first back, besides the Judge and Jay Jordan. It was good to be the first back. I'd be uncomfortable being the last back, not being part of the family. We hung our birds up on the edge of the porch, each bird's neck in between two nails, and walked inside after taking off our waders. A smile shown under the Judge's gray mustache.

"Well boys how'd y'all do?"

I answered. "Well Judge, we did alright. Got some woodies"

"Y'all didn't miss did you?

"No sir, and Judge, I'm not even sure what that word means to tell you the truth."

"Remember, Woodberry boys don't miss. And like I've always said, you can't survive around here without a little lawyer rubbing off on you."

Both my brother and I went to the same high school as the judge. Funny thing was, it was the first time I hadn't jokingly lied about missing birds. It was first time I really had shot a hundred percent. We just laughed and Jay Jordan smiled and nodded. When the grandsons got back we'd whipped up some eggs and sausage and toast and grits and the Judge may've had some rum in his orange juice. His grandsons hadn't done much better than we had, two woodies, a drake mallard, and a gadwall. We said a blessing and ate. It was our second breakfast, but I was hungry. We talked about what we saw that morning and caught up some more. We helped clean up and then my brother and I said bye to everyone and thanked the Judge with a handshake.

It might not seem like that hunt should've stood out. I've had hunts where I've limited out, where there's been so many birds trying to land on top of you that you don't know which one to shoot at. But that hunt was special, not just because I didn't miss. It's just stuck the way some things do and some things don't. Life was simple and life was good. Something about frying up some bluefish for breakfast like we always did with Dad. Something about being out in the swamp on that cold morning. Something about the passed down decoys, passed down guns, passed down waders and passed down clothes. Something about those good family friends that aren't technically family but really are family. Something about that place, the people, the guns, the dog, and that moment. That moment with the sunrise and the swamp and the *wheeeeek* wood ducks hurtling through the trees.

Cypress Water

It was a summer's morning on the Cape Fear coast, the light breeze was a land breeze, and it didn't do much to cut the stifling heat. The wind's overnight shift had let the cool of the salt off the surf dissipate. Now the black flies stuck around on the beach all day, left alone to nag the swimmers and surfers and sunbathers. The surf was flat, almost flat enough to water-ski past the small, easy rolling breakers. The sand would burn your feet by 9:00 AM. I woke up at 7, sweating, the dusty fan doing no good, a whisper of hot air moving through the sliding screen door leading to the porch. My grandmother's house was on the sound side, near the Coast Guard station on the South end of Wrightsville, just off Banks Channel leading to the rocky jetty supported Masonboro Inlet, and the buzz of cicadas was everywhere, louder than the hum of people's AC units. My grandmother was a non-believer in beach air conditioning. At the beach, she'd say, there'd almost always a breeze. But that Saturday sure proved her wrong.

I was back from my freshman year at college up in the piedmont, taking a science class or two at UNCW for summer school. Chemistry and geology. So I was living down at Wrightsville, in my grandmother's beach house. She was back at her house in Mcleansville, large enough for 7 of my aunts and uncles, tucked up in the hardwoods and rolling hills. I

enjoyed having the place to myself. It was refreshing break from school, from the beer drinking and girls and too fast paced class. After a day at the UNCW campus, I'd lay on the old rope hammock, feeling energized and replenished with the sun, reading tales of frontiersmen, ship captains, war heroes, or just normal everyday people. My favorite had been *The Moviegoer*. My father's copy. Written in a sort of italic scrawl was my father's name, the date, and the location.

George Stuart

May 2009

Oriental, North Carolina

When I finished it, I wrote my own underneath, proudly trying to mimic the penmanship.

Walker Stuart

July 2011

Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina

The break from school gave me time to think. To really think. That spring, the spring of 2009, when my father had finished *The Moviegoer*, had marked a sudden deterioration of my father's condition, the start of his slipping away. I had worked at a camp in the mountains, May through late June. I wished I hadn't, though. Those few weeks, my father had gotten worse and worse. I didn't really comprehend how bad everything was. My dad knew how much I loved that camp, so he and my mother didn't pressure me to return to their small second home on the Neuse River.

My father's peace on Earth was that small house, and the doctors at Duke Hospital had released him, letting him return to that place. There, he'd sit in the shade on the paint chipped porch, looking out over the river, the breeze, refreshing, but not too cool, rushing off the brackish tea-colored water. There, he'd sit and read, and watch the boats sail by. I truly wished I hadn't worked that summer, wished I had sat there too, on that porch, soaking up as much of my father as I could.

I remembered the Judge coming up to visit one earlier summer, when my father's health was no concern. The old man, the Judge, was an adopted granddad of sorts, a true southern gentleman, my father had told me. A man with strength and honor. A man who was above or beneath no one except God. The Judge was in his 70's then, his once sandy blond mustache almost white, but when I had seen a portrait of the man in his Spanish moss and old oak forest enveloped home off Bradley Creek, I'd thought him the ideal representation of the Southern lawyer, judge, and sportsman. The judge and my dad met through the nature of their business, the judge and the lawyer. But in addition to the law, they held a common love of one thing in particular. Ducks and duck dogs. And Oakley Plantation.

They'd sat on that porch in Oriental, the judge with a low ball of rum, my father, a non-drinker since he'd graduated from Wake Forest, with iced tea and lemon, occasionally talking humorous court cases, but more often than not, talking ducks. About Oakley, the Judge's once defunct rice plantation he'd bought in the 50's. Talking about bout how the Judge's wood duck boxes had done that spring, the cedar boxes mounted on a 2 by 4 posts, mimicking the hollow areas in trees where the birds nested, trees that had been killed by the salt from the dredging by the Corps of Engineers to make the river "navigable." The Judge always cursed them when he could for killing the natural hardwoods and cypress. Talking about how the dikes were doing,

how they had held through the rough weather. Oakley sure was a special place to the Judge, and my father too. It was Judge's pride and joy in life, a magnificent conservation of the old river's freshwater cypress swampland and long untended slave-dug rice fields. Now it was a duck haven. The Judge lived to hunt ducks. He'd invited me and my brother and my dad out there many a time.

The evening before that hot morning, I'd decided to call up the old man, the Judge. I'd called around cocktail hour, when I knew the old man would be awake from his almost daily afternoon nap, sipping on bourbon or rum. His wife answered the phone in that old Virginian voice, a thing reminiscent of their English or Scottish ancestors, and when I let her know who it was, she quickly put the Judge on the phone. The Judge's replies were always kind but short on the phone. Exactly what he was saying wasn't always easy to understand, and you could hear the age in his voice.

"Judge, this is Walker. How are you doing?"

"Doing well. Are you in Wilmington?"

"Yessir, I'm down here taking classes at UNCW, I'd love to say hey to you and Mrs. Fox, and I'd love to help y'all out at Oakley too."

"Walker, you come on out to Oakley tomorrow. We'll be there around 8:30."

"Yessir, I'll see y'all there."

"O.K., thank you much."

"Yessir,"

Short and to the point, I'd thought.

Now it was morning, and it was going to be a hot one. I had an hour and a half to get out there, out to Oakley. I jumped out of bed, hurried outside onto the porch, down the splintering

stairs, watching for rusty nails, though the neighbor's yard to their dock, and dove in. The water wasn't as cold as I'd have liked, but it felt clean.

I'd started to drink coffee at school, so after I'd quickly rinsed the salt off, thrown on some worn jeans, a t-shirt, and black rubber boots, I made a pot, and I poured it black, on ice, into a Styrofoam cup. I hopped in my 90's Toyota truck, the dash shaking, the engine rumbling, and I drove past the Yacht club, Trolly Stop, the public dock, Wings, and Tower 7 and Kohl's Kustard, the summer people already crowding, then onto the mainland toward the airport, and then I was there, taking the road past an old Kangaroo station. Along the road there were small ranch houses, old trailers, new trailers, chicken coops, some old muscle cars on blocks, dogs running on the loose, and a rebel flag or two. Black kids riding bikes, an older white lady in a garden, a Hispanic man pushing a mower. The road to Oakley, was down around the bend, through a locked gate. Guess the Judge and Jay Jordan haven't gotten here yet, I said to myself. Hope I've still got the key.

I did, and after unlocking it and swinging it open, I drove down the gravel path, down past where it turned into a narrow dike, salt creeks on the left, fresh swamp on the right – the woods pond – where I'd duck hunted many a time. Where the judge had taught me how to spot a wood duck weaving through the trees, fast, how to lead it, how to get in front of the bird and pull the trigger and keep the muzzle moving with the flight of the bird to follow through.

I pulled up to the old A-frame cabin, got out, and sat on the tailgate on a sort of peninsula of dry ground, surrounded by two mucky rice fields edged by dikes lined with cypress to keep out Northeast Cape Fear's tidal salt.

"The salt water didn't used to come up this far, you know, 'till the Corps of Engineers tried to make this river more navigable," the Judge had told me. "Killed all the damn cypress. We used to see several hundred wood ducks roost in there, along the river."

Scattered around the cabin were old cork duck decoys, car battery chargers, resin for waterproofing wood, deer skulls and sheds, coon skulls, and a U.S. Marshalls poster of a bunch of Labrador retrievers in their bulletproof vests with "We'll work for food" written underneath.

After a few minutes, Jay Jordan, the Judge's son-in-law, in his fifties, pulled up in a white Chevy.

"Walker, good to see you buddy. Damn Hot!"

"Yessir! Great to be out here though!"

"About near 90 is what the truck's saying. The old man should be here in a minute. I don't see us doing a whole lot today… half the battle is riding around, making sure you know what needs done."

"I'm sure, this place takes a lot of work."

"Sure does. I think that's the Judge there, coming down the road."

And it was. The old man pulled up in an old black Suburban, dents and scratches all down the sides, a bit of rust on the hood. The Judge eased down from the truck. He wore a tweed golf cap, in spite of the heat.

"Judge, great to see you, happy I could help out," I said as I went over and shook the old man's hand.

"Always happy for some strong backs and weak minds!" The Judge joked, a grin showing under his thin white mustache.

"Ha! Well of course!"

Jay Jordan walked over with three Budweiser's.

"Hot enough for you Judge? About the only way I can work right now, when it's this hot, on a weekend, is with a beer. Judge, you want one? Walker?"

"Jay, you know I'd normally take some rum, but a beer sure would be nice, thank you," the Judge replied.

"I'm good, thank you though" As nice as a beer would've been.

"Your daddy taught you well son," Jay Jordan laughed, "can't go drinking in front of a federal judge now!"

"Smart kid here, Jay!" said the Judge, smiling. "I was thinking that we go and look at the southwest dike, and check up on the second sanctuary pond past the dove field. I'll take Walker to the sanctuary, and we'll meet you around the way, down where the dike comes back in."

"Well," Jay Jordan said after a long sip of beer, "I'll see if one of the John Deer's is running and ride around there.

The Judge and I got in the truck, and we drove in the direction opposite the river, towards the millet field, and the Judge squeezed the truck through a narrow path in a block of pines. It was hot in the Suburban, the heat must've been on, just a bit, even on a summer day, the old man must've been having circulation issues. And the thing had a smell of wet retriever, something that could never be un-absorbed by the upholstery. I was sweating through my blue jeans, trying to get used to the smell. I could see the shake in the Judge's hand as the old man pointed to the millet field, a place I and my little brother had hunted many times, many times with our dad. Who knows how much longer the Judge'll be out there. I saw the Judge's stump of a index finger, cut off by a table saw. When my brother and I were little he'd told us it was a gator that took it off.

"Jay Jordan planted this a few weeks ago, you boys've hunted here."

"Yessir, it looks like it's coming along well."

"In the sanctuary down the way we just put in some birds. I'd of liked the man to put them in the other sanctuary pond back in the woods, but his truck driver was sick and he couldn't back that trailer in there."

"How many birds he put in Judge?" The judge raised ducks, in probably the best conservation effort in the area.

"335, mostly mallards and a few wood ducks." They drove past the first sanctuary pond, the one more or less connected to the northern end of the millet field. I once had to cap a drain pipe so smaller gators couldn't get under the electrified fence, to get at the ducks. It'd been summer, and it'd been hot, hotter than this day even, and Jay Jordan had handed me a Taurus "Judge" pistol, aptly named, a revolver style handgun that could shoot a .45 or a .410 shotgun shell. For the snakes. I'll always remember that, even though I didn't ever have to use it.

The edges of the first sanctuary pond were overgrown, and you could see the birds huddling in the shade. It was a small, wooded pond, surrounded by an electrified fence. You could hear the ducks' and ducklings' happy and content *quaaaak, quaaak, quack-quack-quack-quack*, and their excited feeding chuckles. The Judge loved it. So did your father, I thought to myself. We drove on, through another block of trees and into the dove field, a field with softer sandier soil. The Judge noted how Jay Jordan had planted Jap millet there too, but it wasn't taking off. The tiller, reliant on a harder ground for resistance, couldn't work in the soft sand.

The Judge drove slowly, and the truck had that slow springy bounce that old trucks do off road, almost like a boat feeling the slow roll of the ocean swell. It was still damn hot, the air moving through the open windows wasn't helping.

"Judge how're your dogs doing?" The judge always had a good many dogs, always named well. Mostly black labs, but a few yellows.

"Wish they could be out here with us… too dangerous with the gators out. Ol' Fred's no longer with us, and we've still got Teal and Val, but Val's a little man-shy… the woman who owned him before us raised him in a cage. You just can't do that to a dog."

"No sir, not at all. Fred sure was a good dog."

"He really was." I remembered the Judge letting me and my brother and take Fred to the woods pond, our favorite place to shoot. It was tough shooting, through the trees, but the teal and woodies loved it. The place was full of acorns.

The Judge continued, "I'm convinced that dogs have souls."

"I agree Judge. They've got to." I thought of Cranberry, our chocolate lab. I thought of Cranberry, how she acted the last time I was at the house in Oriental. I noticed something that the light brown dog, Cranberry, had never done before. I would find her, no matter the time of day, lying down, muzzle almost on the edge of the porch, looking out. Ears perked. Alert. Waiting. Waiting for her closest friend, her hunting buddy, to come home. To drive up that oyster shell and gravel driveway. I had never thought about that. I had always, somehow, failed to notice that in the past year or two. Cranberry was there with the immediate family and she watched my father breath his last, but now she waited for him to return. For Cranberry, her master, my father, was always present in her mind. She hadn't been able to distract herself. She was forever waiting for him to come back. Poor dog.

"We'll see them again someday, that I have no doubt" the Judge said.

After a short pause, we kept driving down the path, close to the second sanctuary.

"You know, I think your daddy was one of the best men I've ever known. There were few men more respected than he was."

"That means a lot Judge." We didn't say anything for a few minutes, and the truck kept rumbling down the narrow sandy path. I had forgotten about the heat, momentarily. We will see them again, someday, I thought as we drove on. People and dogs. We remained quiet the next few hundred yards to the second sanctuary pond, and I kept thinking, and I knew what I'd been doing. I'd been pushing memories of my father out of my mind. The man I'd always respected, lived to make proud. A personified strength and duty. Freshman year at college had been a great way to push my mind away from the reality of what had happened. Worked damn well to distract. Girls and booze and classes, and the first two had become the very medicine my father had once warned against. But this place, out here in the swampy wetlands, what used to be considered a worthless dumping ground, was special. It was special to the Judge. It'd been special to my father. I'll never forget my father excitedly siting on the edge of a duck blind bench seat, watching the birds work in the frosty air, whispering to my brother and me where birds were coming from, telling us to get ready. That first duck season when he wasn't with us anymore, my brother and I had taken some of his ashes out to that blind, letting part of my father blow out into the flooded field. It was a sure special place for me too

At the second sanctuary pond, the Judge and I hopped out, and we looked at the ducks, largely mallards, the drakes with the distinctive iridescent green head, the hens more mottled and brown. Even though the Judge hadn't been able to get any new birds put in the second small pond, there was still a good bunch taking refuge there. They were happy, paddling and waddling, and picking at their feathers with their bills, content in the shade and the dark black water. Jay Jordan must have dumped some corn out for them the week before. The Judge and I

watched the ducks for a few more minutes, then got back in the truck and headed towards where the southwest dike met back with the mainland. Jay Jordan was already there.

"Dike's looking good Judge, those cypress seedlings we planted are coming along nicely… should strengthen the things up well if he get a hurricane."

"That's good Jay, that's good. Let's head on back to the cabin."

"Any moccasins?" I asked.

"Nah, didn't see any at least. Hate the damn things. No gators neither. There's a big 12 footer that's been sunning on the mud bank, I've been wanting to put a bullet in his skull, but they don't get that big by being stupid."

Jay Jordan led the way in the John Deere, the Judge and I in the truck behind, and soon we were back. I shook their hands, and told them I was glad to help out, in some way or another. Too damn hot to really do much of anything, Jay said. Great to see you son, the Judge said.

On my way out, far out of sight of the cabin, on the dike that was no more than a car and half wide, I eased my truck, slowing to stop, and shifted into park. I got out, took off my boots and socks, rolled up his jeans. I looked out, off to the freshwater side of the dike, towards the woods pond, and then I started to walk, barefoot. As I walked, I felt the hard gravel rutted road turn to piney grass, then soft muck. The black water got about knee deep, the dark nutrient rich much, enveloping my toes, my ankles. Water moccasins and gators be damned. I slowly waded out, towards a large cypress, its knees exposed from the water. I stopped about 50 feet from it. Spanish moss hanging, draped from the limbs. I listened to the sounds of the swamp. The chattering of all kinds of small birds. An occasional splash of a turtle, a bellow of a frog. In the distance, the hint of quacking mallards from the sanctuary ponds. I saw a group of 7 or 8 lanky

white egrets swooping in from my left, setting into the upper branches of the large cypress. I eased down, to avoid spooking the birds, bending my knees until my thighs were almost water level. Then, I slowly and quietly cupped my hands, dipping them into the water. In my hands, the water looked clear, clean. I brought my hands to the top of my head, and let the water run down. The birds went about their business undisturbed.

I'd thought I remembered hearing the Indians around here believed that the fresh cypress water was medicinal. That it had the power to heal. As I crouched there, in that dark cypress water, I had no doubt of it's healing qualities. I hadn't thought I necessarily needed healing, but the swamp sure cured me of something. Maybe of some sort of malaise and an attempt to forget. It helped me remember.

That Familiar Pull

McLean Cash could hear the roar and rumble of the tractors from the two-lane highway, from where he sat on his tailgate, with a handle of cheap bourbon and a Styrofoam cup. His .38 special, the worn wood-handled revolver, lay holstered beside him on the tailgate. The soft shocks of the little four-wheel drive truck sank, even though he wasn't that hefty of a guy. He watched the dust rising on that brisk fall day, watched the big rigs turning onto the highway a mile or so down, loaded down with freshly cut hardwoods. He heard the clank of the treads of the excavators and Bobcats, as they went about their business of clearing the land. The timber was gone, the rolling hills had been leveled into a red-brown parking lot of a place.

That was his grandfather's land. Some 70 acres, mostly wooded, some fields formerly for cattle, leading down to a creek that flowed into the Haw River in piedmont North Carolina. Bought by some developer in Raleigh. It'd soon be part of a giant tract of land, full of out-of-state research and tech companies. McLean looked at the other side of the road, still largely wooded, but with a few grassy fields for livestock. There were three

structures spread out, two modest ranch style houses, the other a trailer. Either they couldn't make payments, like Mclean and the rest of the surviving family, or the developer's offer was too good to refuse. Soon, all of it, all that land, would also give way to poured concrete and I-beams. Corporate office buildings. Stores. Restaurants. Apartments. Trash and sludge and runoff washing into the river.

"Won't what it was man. Bet granddaddy's rolling in his grave," McLean said to himself. He took a sip of the bourbon from the cup, no ice. It burned, but he drank it without a hesitation. He wished he'd had enough money to at least keep his share of the land after he got discharged. But he didn't. He was never any good with money, and his Army paychecks never lasted. He'd tried to scrounge every last cent, but the math didn't add up. It was yet another card that didn't fall his way. That was his family's land. His land. He didn't give a damn what some piece of paper said. He watched the guys clearing, leveling, hauling off the timber. He knew it wasn't up to them. He assumed they were like him, no college degree. They knew how to work with their hands. Hell, some of them had probably served over there too, thousands of miles away, in that shit hole, he thought.

But now, now with almost no trees, no undergrowth, no nothing, where would the quail fly to? It was almost all barren, McLean saw, except for one single grove of trees, several smaller trees surrounding an ancient oak. Besides that, everything was gone. Where would the cottontails bob and weave and hide? Where would the deer have to take shelter, to bed down? What was going to do the work of all those old oaks? Can't y'all just let me be? Leave my land alone.

"Fuckers."

But he knew it was already too late. The land was flat, barren red clay. It was foreign now. Might has well have been on the damn moon, he thought, or Mars. What used to be his church, his peace on Earth, his escape from bullies at school or cheating girlfriends or whatever the problem was, was no more. It was wrecked. Like a tornado through a trailer park. It used to be a place to flush coveys of quail, to sit in a deer stand, or just lean back on a big oak with a .22 rifle and a book from the public library, waiting on the chatter or a squirrel. Half the time he just loved to sit out there and read. He clinched his fist, finished off the cup, threw it in the truck bed, pulled the brim of his brown baseball cap down low, hopped back in the driver's seat of the small truck and tossed the holstered .38 in the glove box. The engine came to life, taking in air and gasoline, and McLean pulled back onto the highway, accelerating, pausing to upshift.

Some miles down the road, he pulled into a small development, with a Starbucks and a few other restaurants and an ABC store. He went in Starbucks. He took in the place. Quickly, instinctively. There were two females and one male working behind the counter, mainly taking drive-thru orders. The tables and the small lounge area were empty except for one younger female, high school aged, working on a laptop, one older female and college age male, mother and son, the son ideal combatant age, a threat back in another country, another place. But not here, this was not that place, McLean told himself.

He got a coffee, sat in the corner, and propped his boots up on a chair. He'd brought his laptop, slow and dusty. A Word document was already up. He'd always loved to read, and he'd heard writing could be therapeutic, so he'd started working on a piece of writing, a short story, or maybe part of a memoir. He stared and stared at a few paragraphs or so on his laptop, and now his mind was elsewhere, somewhere back across the globe in that hot

desert. He figured that place, that part of his life, was truly hell. That wasn't simply black oil that bubbled and flowed and sometimes spewed from the sandy Earth, he thought. That was surely the fucking Devil that crept up out of the ground in those suburbs of Baghdad where his company were often sent to patrol near Sadr City. As Steve Earl said, that was surely the 'Devil's right hand" that pulled the trigger. It was the Devil that sprayed bullets at him and his buddies. That was surely the Devil's finger, through him, that sent lead flying back, ripping through flesh, enemy or not.

In another country, another place, that female, the mother, could've been another. McLean's company's patrols began to have similar timing, similar rhythm, similar tracks through neighborhoods of gang fighting and civil war. Lazy officers, incompetent planning, whatever it was, those in the insurgency learned the routes. McLean and the guys began to see the same figures, the same kids playing, kicking a homemade soccer ball, the same males bartering and arguing, the same females watching silently behind a veil, a hajib. He remembered one female in particular. Strong brown eyes, piercing really. Everybody saw, everybody thought, everybody worried, and in that state of constant fear and searching for threats when you could never always see them coming, some came to see her as a threat. So one day, the interpreter told her to "fuck off," but she didn't listen, she stayed, and those eyes just looked stronger. Maybe her husband had been one of those first fighters, those first men of Saddam's former army after it's forced disbandment, who with his old AK, took to the insurgency, and popped a few Americans, but was promptly put in the grave thanks to some American lead. So the next time on patrol, they wouldn't let her stay. And she sure enough was there next time, yet again, maybe with a bomb this time, maybe with a suicide vest under those robes this time, maybe with a rocket propelled grenade this time. "Stop

the column. We can't take her out without being shot at… Rules of Engagment" the C.O said, "But fuck that bitch. Give me that shotgun." Loaded with beanbag rounds, the C.O. shot her right in the gut, and you could hear the ribs cracking and the guys laughing and cheering and the guys yelled "Fuck you!" out the speaker. If she hadn't been against them before, she sure was now, McLean thought, but then again, fuck her. Too many of his buddies hadn't come home, too many guys hadn't returned in one piece because they, or their C.O.'s, had been too sympathetic. Buddies listed in ink and etched deep on his upper back.

He'd been trying to write through it, but he just didn't think he could truly do it justice, didn't think he could put what it was really like into actual words. He couldn't seem to do it just right. To explain that fucking shit-show to these people who had no possible way to even imagine it.

He was in his mid 30's now. His body and mind, worn, worn and beat and bruised and scarred as war likes to do to those who get dragged in. He'd planned on going to school, now that he was out, done with all the bureaucratic bullshit that was the Army. But now he was tired. Nothing had seemed to turn out like he'd planned. No money, no girl, no job, and now, no land. He was stuck, like a truck in the mud - tires without enough tread, spinning, and the more they spin, the more stuck the thing gets. He'd rented a trailer, near the river, close to his grandfather's land. Land his family had held since World War II. His grandfather had come home, and bought it. Lived there, worked there, died there. McLean had planned on going to school, getting some kind of job where he could live on that land too. He could hunt deer in the fall and winter, he could shoot a few geese in a field planted with corn, and he could hunt turkeys in the woods in the spring. Not anymore. He just kept

staring at the blinking screen and a few lines of words that made no sense, as his mind went back.

He'd once had a girlfriend a few years before. Maria. They'd lived together near Fort Bragg. They'd had a puppy, a mix of Labrador and something else. Blackjack. But she'd gotten up with someone else when McLean was away, some dude with more money, some guy who wasn't on the far side of the world for months at a time, some guy who wasn't trapped in his own head when he was home. McLean remembered her dark brown hair, the hint of a wave, her tanned skin, the hint of South America. She had the smoothest skin of any girl he'd ever been with, and it was odd, but he could only compare it to the smoothness of latex paint. But she was gone, gone almost like everything he'd planned out in his life. And that bitch took the damn dog, he thought to himself. Just like a fucking movie, just like fucking *Jarhead*.

He looked at the mother and son, the son somewhere in his college years, early twenties, the mother probably in her fifties. The mother bought the son a coffee, and they'd sat down, two tables away. McLean listened and watched, his gaze hidden below a dirty baseball cap brim. The son was about to go back to school, it seemed. The mother asked him what the week held in store, asked him about a job interview, about a spring break trip to the Caribbean, about some camera the son had said he wanted. The son looked tired, bags around his eyes, not quite happy and content. What the hell could that kid have to be down about? McLean thought. The kid's got most of his life ahead of him. A damn good one too. What the fuck does he have to worry about? What the fuck could be possibly be so down about? Fucking asshole. He wanted to burst up, pushing his table over in the same motion, pull out his combat knife tucked in his boot, and bring it to that fucker's neck as his

training and drilling rushed back, and yell into his face until that little shit knew how pathetic he was. But he didn't, and he noticed he was making fists above his keyboard, shaking red hands and he slowly calmed, taking deep breaths and then shakily drinking from his coffee cup. He was glad the pistol had stayed in the truck. How easy it would've been, to revert back to that familiar pull, that familiar power, that regaining of the control he was losing.

Soon, the son hit the road, and the mother stuck around for a few more minutes, working on her computer. He knew he shouldn't truly feel animosity towards them, but he knew he didn't really give a damn either.

He walked up to get a piece of cake from the half buzzed haired and funk ear-ringed girl working the register.

"Would you like to let your change go to the troops sir?"

"What'd you say? No… that isn't gonna do shit." He sort of enjoyed the look of confusion and disgust that showed on her face. She couldn't have missed his buzzed- short hair, the high-and-tight look, the drab hat, the boots. He ate the cake, stared some more, but no words came, so he left the place.

On the corner, before McLean turned onto the highway, there was an older black man, no legs. The sign, a vet, no home, no food. Long white beard, drab green pants tied off at the ends. McLean had no respect for guys who begged like that, veteran or fake.

"Sorry brother," and smoke was all that came out from McLean's truck window.

It was starting to get dark, and McLean drove back to the trailer he was renting from a farmer for $195 a month. It stood alone, close to a stand of pines, beside an old chicken coop and a rotted out dog box. He ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a tart green apple

sprinkled with salt, and heated up some tomato soup and drank two heavy Bud Ice beers. Sitting at a foldout table, on a foldout chair, he opened up his laptop, and he tried to write. But, again, it just wasn't happening. The thoughts of the blood and the sand and the shit, literal stinking shit, took over the blank white screen. Human flesh cauterized and welded to the armored vehicles after a blast.

He'd brought the revolver in with him, and it sat on the table. He felt the wood grip, and, for a moment, for a second, there was the slightest electric pulse, the slightest urge, the slightest inclination to raise it up, up to his head, and send a bullet through his brain and in the endless headache that his life had become. There wasn't much left for him. Nothing really. There was a pain in his head that wanted desperately to come bursting out in the relief of a bullet's puncture. Plenty of his buddies had offed themselves. Back home, or in country. But he knew, deep down, in his gut, that following suit was the coward's way out.

He felt weak. He felt cornered. Trapped, trapped like a treed black bear, the dogs howling below. He felt alone. He flipped open his cell phone, and he called Maria. Straight to voicemail.

"Maria, it's McLean… I, I want to see you, I want to talk to you. I want to see Blackjack. Please, please call me back."

He called her a few more times over the next hour.

"Maria, I don't know where you are, but I need you. The thought of you with someone else makes me sick…"

"Maria please give me a ring…"

But she never answered. Close to midnight, McLean called Tommy, another corporal who was in his company back in Iraq.

"McLean, what's up dude?"

"Nothing man, just wanted to check in. How're the kids?" McLean said, trying to reduce the slurring, to put a little cheer in his voice.

"Great, they're great. It's hard, though man. I mean, damn, it's expensive. I've re-upped."

"Serious Tommy?"

"Yeah. Honestly, bro, if I get sent back, and I don't make it back home, my wife and kids will get more from the Army than I get now. You hear about Crowder?"

"Yeah I did. "

"We've gotta stay strong dude. You, me, all of us. We can't give up like Crowder and those guys… Everything ok?"

"Nah… nah, I'm good."

McLean knew there was some kind of moral difference between what Tommy was doing, and what Crowder did. One way was very possible death at someone else's hand, and the other by your own, he thought. But at the end of the day, they weren't too much different. Crowder had gone to the last extreme to escape. But Tommy was trying to escape too. McLean needed to escape. He couldn't do it by his own hand, and he sure as hell wasn't re-upping. He sat and the thought and he drank and as he drank the thoughts were hazy, but they seemed clearer at the same time.

He'd huff it over to his granddad's land. And there he'd sit, nestled in the undergrowth along the property line. He'd wait. And hell, he'd know what he'd do. He'd wait there, every night, every day, resupplying at the trailer. He'd wait until some men in suits showed up. Some fucking investors or big wigs. And then he'd fuck them up. He'd

feel the familiar resistance of the trigger as his finger pulled back, causing an sharp explosion and recoil and sending a projectile through the air. It'd be a feeling of power. He'd show them. He'd show Maria. He'd show them all. He'd never actually seen any of his shots do their dirty work back across the world, in that desert, in that dusty Iraqi town, but he was sure one or two had hit home. This time, he'd see it. He'd send a bullet though their brains at 150, 200 yards. The law would get to him soon after, he was sure of it. But he didn't care. Too much had been taken from a desperate man. He was ready.

It was close to 1 AM now. He dressed in camouflage and dark clothing, a mix of hunting gear and former Army battle dress. He grabbed a pint of whiskey, a wine cork, a lighter, his .38 revolver, and his dad's old A-Bolt Browning deer rifle. It was a solid, heavy gun, well made, and it, along with the scope on it, was probably the most valuable of McLean's possessions. He set out into the night. And an hour later, he was closing in on his grandfather's land. When he got there, it was an eerie sight, a place of ghosts if McLean believed in them. The moon's light reflected off the puddled mud. He looked out, and barely saw the grove of trees that remained on the property, surrounding the huge, ancient oak. He burned the end of the cork, charring it, and rubbed it over his face, to take out the shine. He sat. He sat for while, half awake, until his cell lit up blue and started ringing faintly through the 2 AM dark. "Maria Calling", the screen read.

"Hello?"

"Mclean? Are you OK? Talk to me. Please McLean."

"Maria, I don't know Maria. I didn't think you'd call back."

"You know I still care about you."

"I wish you did."

"Well I'm calling you know aren't I? At 2 in the morning. Please McLean, don't do anything stupid. Come meet me. Where are you? I'm in Durham. Please McLean, I don't want anything to happen to you?"

He wanted to tell her to fuck herself. But he said ok.

"OK Maria, OK. Where in Durham?"

"Somewhere in Southpoint, I'll text you tomorrow."

McLean didn't believe her. That bitch. He wanted to show her how much of a bitch she'd been. He wanted to pull that trigger. What better fuck you. He stayed awake, and then at 6 AM the first of the workers showed up. Hidden, in the undergrowth, he looked through the scope. No suits. How easy it would be, lining up the crosshairs with the figure behind, and that ever so slight squeeze, that pull, followed by the slump of a body. How simple, pure power through his veins. But these weren't the guys. These guys were taking his land. These guys weren't flattening his land, turning it into that desert, all too much like that other one back across the world. As if the big shot investors wanted him to bring the violence here too. And part of him wanted to. He waited, and waited, and none of the big shots showed up.

As he looked through the scope, he watched on the the guys who'd been operating the tracked Bobcat. The guy was taking a water break. Through the scope, he noticed something. Tattooed on his arm was a black and white American Flag, etched in ink, flying forward, running forward, just as the flag is on the uniform. He wanted to answer for all that had gone bad, but to do this, to shoot, to pull that trigger, was to betray all he had been through, all he had trudged through. It wouldn't help him. It'd make it worse, and he'd carry it to the grave.

"God damn it Maria."

On the way to go see her, he saw the same old black man he'd seen the day before. No legs, sitting. He looked at him, at the red light. He looked at him hard, and the old man looked bad, but softly. McLean pulled off the road, got out of the truck.

"What's your name boss?" McLean asked.

"The name's Delroy."

"You doing alright Delroy?"

"I'm hangin' in brother. Damn diabetes took my legs. Can't do much else besides sit here. I hate it, I hate it more than almost anything."

"Delroy you wanna beer?"

"I won't say no to that. Now what's your name?

"McLean." McLean helped the old man into his truck, and they crossed the intersection and pulled in the gas station across the street. McLean bought two tall-boy beers. And they sat outside the gas station and drank them.

"McLean, I'd bet you was over in the Middle East wasn't you?"

"I was, Delroy. I try not to think about it, but lately I can't escape it. I've lost a lot you know, a woman, mainly." He instantly felt bad for saying it. The guy had lost a whole lot more.

"We all've done our fair share of that haven't we." It was silent for a while, and they just sipped on their beer. Fuck Maria, McLean thought.

"Delroy, let me give you a ride somewhere man, where've you got to go? I'll buy you some lunch."

Western Wind

After El Paso, after smoking a Marlboro Light, held between two dry and cracked fingers, on that gritty motel balcony, after looking out, across the border into smoggy Ciudad de Juarez, I took off on Interstate 10, eastbound.

…

Before El Paso, I'd been trying to find work near Cheyenne, living out of the truck. Before Wyoming, I'd hit the road, a year before, leaving North Carolina. I'd kissed a college degree, a steady job, a girlfriend, and a mother goodbye. Few people understood why, and I'm not sure I totally did myself. But I had to go. There was just some innate urge. There was something that wouldn't let me stay on the same old track, on the track of finding a steady job with a steady girlfriend and ending with a steady life in suburban Raleigh or Charlotte or Atlanta. A life where I'd be confined and constrained. A life where all of the sudden you wake up and it's all over, and you wonder, where the hell did it all go? What was I doing here anyway? I felt

that the answer was to be found in wild places. I'd cashed out a good deal of my bank account, saved up from summer jobs and odd jobs doing yard work and painting and helping people move. The family, the girlfriend, they all didn't appreciate it very much, but that was ok. There had to be something more to living than living to die. So I went north, then west. Maine and Vermont for a stint. The woods of Michigan. Then Wyoming. I'd gotten to Wyoming in the early spring. I'd slept in the truck, under the camper top, with a 30/30-lever action rifle by my side. It'd been the wrong time of year, too early on in the summer to get a job working alongside the Mexicans and Guatemalans and Hondurans. So I painted a few houses and barns until I worked up enough gas money for the little 4 speed and I headed south into Colorado.

In Colorado, on the Western Slope, I got a job at a guest ranch, helping out with the irrigation. It was a small, overpriced place– for schmucks who'd pay anywhere from ten to thirty grand a week for "rustic luxury," and a chance to ride horses and to wave a fly rod around. I first had help clear out one or two collapsed ditches with the foreman. But the big job was the piping for the entire place's water. It all came from a spring, halfway up Saddle Mountain. The mountain was steep, blanketed largely with rocky sagebrush and scraggly scrub oaks that would stick and tear your shirt and maybe even your jeans, until you broke above the tree line, onto a bald slate-colored crown.

The problem was the place's water. The problem was a lack of water. Nothing to cook with, nothing for those high-paying guests to shower in, nothing for them to flush the toilets. The foreman, Chris, a thin guy with a pointed nose and wire glasses, sent me up there with one of their seasonal employees. A girl, a few years younger, maybe a year out of college. Sandy blond hair, tanned skin, and an occasional hint of Cajun in her voice. She was the instructor at the ranch's sporting clays range. Her name was Amy. There was something about her. There

was something about the way she smiled, something about the softness in the way she shook my hand, something about the slight sweat of her palms.

Amy drove the four-by-four Polaris, and the two of us forded the stream in the vehicle at the base of the mountain, the water still muddy and swollen with the snowmelt runoff as it rushed by. The utility vehicle barely fit through the steep narrow trail heading up the mountain, and Amy had to really give the thing some gas. We drove as far as we could, some thirty yards from the spring, about halfway up the mountain. Besides being introduced, she'd been quiet the whole time, so as we hiked the rest of the way up, I asked her how she came to get out there.

"Yea, so I've worked at this ranch in central Texas for a few summers, and we'd guide safari style antelope and deer hunts, where we'd stalk 'em with the clients. But I just finished school in Lafayette near Baton Rouge, and I wanted to see something new, you know? How about you Bill?"

"Well I actually split from North Carolina a year ago. Could've graduated from school, but it just seemed like such a waste of money. Figured I could learn more out here, out in the real world. How long you going to be out here?"

"At least until September. I'm trying to apprentice with a professional hunter in Namibia, north of South Africa – you gotta do it there… South Africa only lets you get certified if you're native born."

"Damn that'd be awesome."

I tried to think of the right thing to say to this girl, this girl who wasn't like any other girl I'd met before, this girl with tanned skin and blond hair who could take down an antelope at 300 yards. But before I could, we got to the spring, and we looked down into a square, concrete

well-looking thing that was open at the top and was open down into the ground. As far as I could tell, everything looked fine, there was surely water at the bottom.

"Must be a leak somewhere in the lines, then" She said. "Chris said that the pipes work their way down the mountain from here, halfway buried, sometimes above ground."

"Well damn, hope we find this dang leak."

The morning air had been dry and cool and crisp, but after hiking up and down the incline, it had gotten warmer. My back was hot from my small backpack, sweating. We then started to work our way down. It was fairly open at first, but then the pipes led us through narrow trails, almost like game trails, zigzagging through the scrub oak.

"Chris said the bears could've torn up some of the lines. They like to do that apparently," Amy said.

We kept working our way down, watching our footing on loose dirt. Apparently the guys who'd put in the lines had just left the un-used PVC piping out there, so we'd more than occasionally start following the wrong pipe, running into an exposed opening and a dead end of a lattice-like wall of scrub oak. It was tough on your calves and knees and ankles, hiking down the steep incline, keeping steady and balanced, and then having to backtrack, but Amy had this cheerful look about her.

We got about another one fourth of the way down the mountain, sore and tired, and we yet again wound up at what seemed to be a dead end.

"Well damn," I said, "this is tougher than I thought. Gotten out of shape."

"Hey, Billy, look a few yards up, at the joint in the pipe." Somehow, I hadn't noticed, but the ground around us wasn't dry. It was soft. A darker soil, moist with mountain spring water that was dripping from where two pieces of pipe were connected.

"Ha! Shit! Guess we found one of the leaks." I took out my water bottle, and offered it to her.

She took some. I went and sat in the shade, on a boulder, a remnant of an old ice age, the ground soft under my boots. She sat beside me. It was about midday. We sat, and didn't talk, and we listened. She moved down, sitting on the mossy ground, her back against the rock. As she leaned her head back and closed her eyes, I looked at her, more closely than I had been able to before. I saw small beads of sweat resting on her brow, sun-bleached hair tucked behind a tanned ear, and then I moved down too. I sat, and there was a stillness in the dry mountain breeze. I sat and I thought. I thought about what I was doing, about my search for whatever it was I was searching for. Some kind of authenticity that wasn't found back home, back in some law firm with a girl who was nice as could be, but nothing special. Maybe what I was looking for was this.

But then she broke me from my thoughts with a small but strong hand on my thigh, and things went on from there. Out in on that mountain, on the western slope of the Rockies, shaded from the noon sun. There was some kind of clarity that hadn't been there before, gin-clear like a mountain stream, with me and that bayou girl not quite above the tree line.

We found a few more leaks, and I stayed there a few more days, working for some decent pay, and a few more nights spent mostly in that girl's room. For a bit, for a that short amount of time, I thought maybe I'd found something there. But then it was gone. The last night with her, in that small room, I stared at the fan above and I knew it hadn't been it. That girl was like none I'd ever met, but the newness of that girl had already faded. There was too much content-ness pushed around that room with the mountain air. There was something about her, something that wasn't ever quite there with other girls. I'm not sure I'd call it love. But just like other girls,

once the challenge was over, we started to have something that began to feel usual and solid. Things weren't as clear as they'd been that day on that mountain. They'd gotten muddied. Like my girlfriend before, I felt as I lay on that bed, staring at the fan, like tiny roots were holding me in place, pulling me in, deeper and deeper, until I was stuck and life would pass me by. On top of that, the ranch didn't need my labor there anymore. Even if I'd wanted to stay with all my heart, it wasn't going to happen. It couldn't happen. I liked that wild and pretty girl, Amy, and after her, it was the closest I'd been to hanging around. She held me and told me not to leave, "Billy, come on, you know you want to stay." Part of me did, but I kissed that girl goodbye, like my old girlfriend before, a certain sweetness on her lips, and I left early one morning. When I got on the road, I thought, maybe that girl, whatever could've come out of that, was just another missed opportunity. That wild and pretty bayou girl with those green eyes, those eyes told you not to leave, you bastard.

But that was the price to pay. I had to hit the road, had to keep moving, to keep on looking. Life kept going on, and so did I, fearful of not doing all I could.

…

On Interstate 10 I drove through the Texas desert. Badlands, some might've called it. I got the truck up to 105 before I made it to Marfa. From there, I drove to Terlingua a tiny crossroads town. There were remnants of an old mining village, old stone one room shacks, abandoned like a ghost town. The place was dusty and khaki colored, with drab olive sagebrush and brown tumbleweeds and mountains and mesas stretched on in the distance, an orange-pink with the setting sun. Then, once to the crossroads of town, there were a few small houses and

trailers, and a handful of stores, and bars that were restaurants too, sustained by a handful of locals and the tourists passing through to visit Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande flowing through it.

I drank margaritas in one bar, a lonely place, dim and dark. It was built into a small hill, cave-like. It was just me, except for a few locals and the owner drunk off their asses, taking refuge from the desert. I thought of Guy Clark. This was his kind of place. This dry, desert town, a mix of Spanish and English, swept by the wind and soaked in liquor. I thought I'd maybe stay there, for a decent bit, especially when I stumbled out in the night, the Milky Way glowing and spiraling above. Maybe, if I called that girl, she'd come down to see me. But I never did, I had to keep rolling on, and the liquor helped push her out of my head.

I woke up in the truck, with a sore head, looking out into a bright desert day. Down the road from where I'd pulled off, was a canoe for sale - $200 read the sign. I went and found the owner, and bought it. I asked the curly haired and wrinkled old woman about floating the Rio.

"Put in at the pump house in Big Bend, and you can paddle and camp all the way down close to La Linda. It's about 30 miles. But first you'll have to drive down to La Linda. There's this man, Fred, he's got a ranch past the park boundary where you can take out. It'll be right past an old bridge. He'll shuttle you back up to the put in." I thanked her, bought some cans of spam, a few jugs of water, some tortillas, a jar of peanut butter, a few bags of ice for the cooler, eggs, and a fifth of rum at the store. I grabbed a greasy sandwich of a lunch, and another margarita at the bar, then took off, driving south. It took a few hours to get to Fred's, and by the time I did, it was getting dark.

He had a sort of compound, with a one-floor house and small shed and rusty water and gas tanks up on a small hill, overlooking the river. Across the river, into Mexico, was a very

small village. Fred greeted me with a Lone Star beer. He was tan and weathered. Thin with a dark graying beard and a black baseball cap.

"Son what brings you out this way? Gonna float the Rio?"

"That's right, you mind shuttling me back up into Big Bend?"

"How bout this. It's getting dark. You stay on my property. There's some other dudes camping down the way, and I'm cooking up some beef for everybody. We'll have a fire and drink some beers. Here, come on with me, I'm gonna go buy some *mota* from some Mexicans across the Rio."

So we hopped in his beater Toyota truck, a peace sign painted on the rusted out hood, and drove the two hundred or so sandy yards down to the Rio. There were a few Mexicans working a pump on the other side, and a few kids watching jug-lines for catfish in the slightly hazy but beautiful turquoise waters of the Rio.

"Tienes mota?" Fred yelled across. "It's good stuff, not shit weed," he said to me.

"Si amigo, mandame el dinero." Fred waded across a shallow stretch, and they traded money for the marijuana. You could tell they'd gotten to know each other, they shook hands the way only friends, or at least normal acquaintances, do. Back in the truck, Fred effortlessly rolled up a joint. He got it going, handed it to me, and I took a short drag. It sure smelled like Mexico.

"Fred, what's your story? What brought you out here?"

"Bill, brother, I did thirty years in the Corps. I did some shit, saw some major shit, and now I'm here." We kept smoking, kept quiet, and then Fred spoke again. "Yeah man, it's not for everybody, living out here. I just can't take enclosed spaces. Need that wide open sky. I left a woman behind in Dallas, and it's rough being alone in the winter, sometimes, but I'll build bikes

in my garage, and I've got a few buddies around and once it warms up we'll go and moon Mexico with our white asses, then ride up to Canada and moon them too. Damn fine life."

"You kept up with your woman in Dallas?"

"I've given her a call when I'm deep in the liquor a time or two, she sure was special. But she's got something else going now. There's enough whores around Terlingua or Marathon anyway." He paused, inhaling. "I know you're floating the river, but what really brings you out here, by yourself? Everybody's either running from something, or they're trying to look for it. I looked for a while myself, you know"

"Well I wouldn't like to think I'm running from anything. And I'd like to think I'm trying to find something, to learn something about this life that satisfies me. Not much has, not even this girl…"

"There's always a girl. And son, I'll tell you, I'll tell you what, I was darn close to where you're at, back in the day. I rambled, couldn't find it. I joined the corps, couldn't find it. Wandered some more, and the same damn result man. I'll tell you, you ain't ever going to find what you're looking for." Fred pointed a gnarled finger at me. "It don't exist. You've gotta find your place, and settle down. You can wander all you want, but you won't ever be happy until you do that, until you find you a place and force yourself to be content."

Back at the compound we ate around the fire, Texas style, and downed some Lone Star beers. I stared up into the night, watching the ashes float and then get rushed off in the desert breeze. What was I going to do, keep on moving, blown on and on like those ashes in that western wind, searching for some kind of meaning in these wild places until I fizzled out? Was that the way to live? Alone and on the road? I looked out into the desert night, and I looked until I couldn't, and I fell asleep.

The next day Fred shuttled me back to the park, some 30 miles upriver. I shook his hand, and gave him a few bucks to say thanks. I put in downstream of some slight rapids, the canoe loaded with most all of my personal effects in an Army duffle bag, a small tent, a double burner propane camping stove, and an igloo cooler full of ice, food, water, and liquor. I drifted with the current, past the tourist-y picnic tables, and the shallow stretches where the Mexicans forded across to sell trinkets, and soon I was alone. The sun was sinking by the time I was entering Boquillas Canyon, the walls lit with the sun, an orange, yellow with a clayish tint. I found a good sandbar to camp on. I set up the tent, cranked up the burner, and cooked a few spam quesadillas. I dug a small hole, and made a small fire in it, largely just kindling. I sat, and I sipped warm rum and watched the turquoise green water flow on past, through the towering canyon walls cut through the Earth's crust ages ago. Maybe Fred was right. Maybe I'd been searching for meaning, searching for some sort of purpose in these wild places, and maybe I'd never find it. Maybe it was a search in vain, striving to find something that didn't exist.

But my eyes remained on that green water. It flowed and flowed. Slower in some parts. Faster in others. Rougher in the fast riffles. Sometimes funneled in a narrow chute river left or river right, by a sandbar. Smoother in the slow, deep bends. The current seam strong on one side, weak on the other. But the water kept on moving. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, but never stopping.