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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Charles Brian Conn entitled "Low Water: A Collection of Short Fiction." I have examined the electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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**Low Water: A Collection of Short Fiction**

A Thesis Presented for

the Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga

Charles Brian Conn

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## **Abstract**

The craft of fiction evolves and progresses alongside other pursuits in the humanities.

This thesis project represents a culmination of study in the process of creating fiction

from standard practices which are fundamental to creating fiction that “works” to

innovations in the field and how they have shaped the craft through its history. The

creative thesis project is an attempt to apply some of these fundamental and experimental

concepts to my own creative work and thereby develop a collection of short fiction

representative of my abilities as a writer and my training as a writing student. A brief

look into the use of point of view in a small selection of published short fiction introduces

my collection of four original short stories.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Story 1: Low Water	14
Story 2: Zero	38
Story 3: Prodigal Brother	55
Story 4: The One	78
Bibliography	93
Vita	96

## **Introduction**

### **Point of View: Bouncing the Reader Toward Truth**

In surveying a few popular books on the craft of fiction, namely Rust Hills's *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction*, and David Jauss's *Alone With All That Could Happen*, it is difficult to avoid noting the importance of point of view to any writer's craft. Jauss claims it is "arguably the most important element of fiction writing" (25). Burroway says, "Apart from the use of significant detail, there is no more important skill for a writer of fiction to grasp than this" (311). Hills remarks that when an author tells his story, "choices about point of view will undoubtedly be the most important decisions about technique that he has to make" (120). He quotes E. M. Forster: "The 'whole intricate question of method' resolves itself not into formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says" (131).

Burroway has a particularly well-organized description of the various aspects of point of view. She counts the form of narration (story, monologue, letter, or stream of consciousness, to name several) and the identity of the narrator as important facets of point of view, along with the intended audience (304). But this essay will focus on what Jauss concisely calls "where the language is coming from," what he considers "one of the most important issues in point of view" (41) and how that relates to stories from three authors: Anton Chekhov, Stephen King, and Tim O'Brien, from their respective collections, *Stories*, *Different Seasons*, and *The Things They Carried*. The conclusion will briefly discuss how these concepts work in my own collection, which comprises the body of this thesis.

At its simplest, point of view can be understood as the grammatical condition of first-, second-, or third-person perspective. In third person, the perspective is divided more distinctly into variations of distance from characters both in time and in consciousness. For instance, a narration may be in present tense and sound like a description of events as they are happening, or like a remembrance of how they happened thirty years ago. Also, these narrations can include the thoughts of more than one character, which Burroway calls editorial omniscience; the thoughts of only one, which she calls limited omniscience; or none of these internal thoughts or feelings, sticking to facts of action, description, and dialogue. Burroway calls this final third person point of view “objective reporting” (297-299). Jauss refers to it as the “dramatic” point of view, because it reads like a play script (26).

In the broader context of all aforementioned variations on point of view, Jauss describes the particular choice an author makes for his narration as “where the language is coming from” instead of simply a question of grammatical person (37). This choice defines a specific time and consciousness, a mind at a certain place which is relating the story to us. How we experience a story hinges partly on the way it is narrated, from when and by whom.

Much of the craft advice I have read suggests consistency in point of view to be a firm rule. Hills states that once a writer has “indicated by some statement or some construction what point of view is being used in the story, then he is committed to some extent to maintain it” (124). Burroway simply says, “In establishing the story’s point of view, you make your own rules, but having made them, you must stick to them” (310).

Further, she says, “Once established, point of view constitutes a contract between author and reader, and it will be difficult to break the contract gracefully,” indicating that readers will not tolerate much change in point of view once it has been established (311). When craft books claim that point of view is so important, and when they offer advice about its consistency with such words as “commitment” and “contract,” the advice begins to take on the attributes of a fixed rule, or at least a guideline to be broken at the peril of the writer. Jausss has a differing opinion about consistency in point of view. He states:

The lack of understanding about point of view is also due to the tendency of authors of creative writing and literature textbooks to write prescriptively instead of descriptively about point of view, asserting that certain techniques are available only to certain types of narrators and that a work’s point of view should be consistent. (25-26)

He clarifies his assertion by pointing out that Chekhov “violates the so-called ‘rule’ against shifting point of view in his story ‘A Trifle From Real Life’ in order to manipulate distance and achieve the effect he desires” (28). In the story, the narrator relates a conversation between Nikolai Belayeff and his lover’s son Aliosha. The narration only reports Nikolai’s thoughts, but in two sentences, once in the middle and then in the final sentence, the narrator relates information only Aliosha would know. It is through this shift that the reader finds which character has undergone a change, the “moved” character (Jausss 28). In fact, Jausss maintains that this particular rule regarding point of view indeed is broken frequently and with powerful results:

Because it is generally a bad idea to shift person in a work of fiction – to have a first-person narrator suddenly morph into a third-person narrator, for example – we leap to the conclusion that point of view should be singular and consistent. In fact, however singular and consistent the person of a story may be, the techniques that truly constitute point of view are inevitably multiple and shifting. For example, the point of view we call third-person omniscience may be consistently third person but it is not consistently omniscient, for the narrator must of necessity shift from omniscience to the dramatic point of view whenever she deals with a character whose mind she does not enter. (35)

Jauss discusses a story by Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants,” and illustrates Hemingway’s move from a strictly dramatic point of view to an instant in which the distance falters between one male character and the reader, with a single word. Jauss states, “He writes that the man ‘drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train’” (27). What was a story written without any emotional narrative embellishment, with the intrusion of the word “reasonably” into the observations of one character, becomes instead the story from the perspective of that character. The grammatical point of view has not changed, but with that tiny revelation of opinion in which the male character considers the movement of passersby to be reasonable, the distance shifts closer, and the reader is able to view the story from within the man’s consciousness, giving all the previous narration a new emotional tint.

It is a shifting *within* stories, one that we readily accept without realizing it, upon which Jauss is focusing. His use of Hemingway and Chekhov helps to show this shift

working successfully. Jauss continues, “As these two examples suggest (Hemingway and Chekhov), perhaps the most important purpose of point of view is to manipulate the degree of distance between the characters and the reader in order to achieve the emotional, intellectual, and moral responses the author desires” (30). So more specifically, Jauss is referring to shifting of distance. Hills echoes the observation: “But it is possible to move ‘in’ and ‘out’ wonderfully effectively if you know what you want to do and set up the point of view so as to achieve it” (127). Hills uses an example from Faulkner. I have chosen Chekhov, King, and O’Brien in order to discover how deeply they “committed” to the “contract” of point of view in their stories once they established it.

In the collections I am considering, it appears the three authors follow the guideline of consistency in most of their stories. For instance, out of the four novellas in *Different Seasons*, King keeps the point of view constant within three of them. In “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption” the story is told in first person from the perspective of Red, an inmate in Shawshank Prison, about the escape of another prisoner, his friend Andy Dufresne. The temporal distance of the narration is apparent from the beginning. Red is telling a story that began years ago, but he tells it almost up to the narrative present, just after Andy’s escape, and in the epilogue he switches to present tense to narrate his pursuit of Andy’s trail into Mexico. “The Body” is the story of four boys who go on a hike to look for a dead body in the next county, near the railroad tracks they use for their journey. This story is told in first person from the perspective of one of the boys twenty years later. Similarly, “The Breathing Method” is also told in first

person, but from the perspective of an old man. Like “Shawshank,” both stories keep the same narrators throughout. King employs differing points of view to narrate these three stories, using characters close to or at distance from the action and with the narrator remembering events from a long time ago (as in “The Body”) or from more recent memories like the end of Red’s story. He even uses a frame to include a second story in “The Breathing Method.” However, the consciousness of the narrator, whose head the reader is in, remains constant in the three stories once the story-telling begins.

“Apt Pupil” is the second tale in King’s collection of novellas (or long short stories) and is told in third-person omniscient. It is the story of a boy, Todd, who discovers a former Nazi death camp commandant living in his town in California. He blackmails the man into telling him all he knows about the camps, reviving the old man’s memory. However, the power Todd wields shifts so that both characters have something to hide and therefore both have power over the other. The point of view at the beginning of the story is close to the boy, Todd. But gradually, as the old man regains power in the relationship, the view begins to shift to his. By the end, the story-telling is equally close to the two.

Like King, Chekhov has several stories in which he adheres to consistency in point of view, once he defines it in a story. But, as Jauss pointed out in “A Trifle From Real Life,” sometimes he makes exceptions. “Ward No. 6,” a story from the Chekhov collection I surveyed, also uses shift in point of view to reveal the story’s meaning as a whole.

“Ward No. 6” is a long story about a mental ward, its patients and a doctor who visits and eventually is committed into its care. The narration begins in an omniscient third person, and we move from the consciousness and history of Ivan Dmitrich, one of the patients, to that of the doctor, Andrei Yefimych, who visits the ward more and more frequently, until his colleagues think he has gone mad and commit him, at which point the omniscience shifts to close third-person, residing only in Yefimych’s mind. We are stuck in Andrei Yefimych, even as he finds himself stuck in Ward No. 6 where he dies. Chekhov, through the final thoughts of this character ponders the immortality preached and believed by Christians and other people of faith, and speaks of Andrei’s disbelief in this. “Andrei Yefimych understood that his end had come and remembered that Ivan Dmitrich, Mikhail Averyanych, and millions of people believed in immortality. And what if it was so? But he did not want immortality, and he thought of it for only a moment” (220). It is as though, in increasingly smaller concentric circles of perspective, we become confined to Chekhov’s view of life as a single event, stuck in the minds we are born with, ending in the nothingness of death. Chekhov shifts perspective not only to show the reader how to feel, but also even to touch on this larger theme.

O’Brien’s collection *The Things They Carried* is another masterful example of manipulation of point of view. Where the language is coming from becomes a question the reader must grapple with between stories, within stories and across all of the stories. And it is used to make a bold statement about what’s important in writing fiction as well.

Point of view shifts are common within and between stories in *The Things They Carried*, which is a group of tales surrounding the members of a platoon who fought in

the Vietnam Conflict. The stories are narrated by a single individual, also named Tim O'Brien, a veteran of the war in Vietnam. This point of view links the stories, but they are stories in which a variety of characters take center stage.

In one story, "Speaking of Courage," the narrator tells us in close third person about Norman Bowker, one of the characters in the platoon, driving around the town back home after the war, and how badly he wants to tell a story to someone. He imagines telling his father the story of how, under fire, he allowed his friend Kiowa to be sucked into a mud pit to die. We are told the war story through this frame, and the frame is closed as Bowker's imaginary telling ends, and he continues driving and can't tell this tale to anyone. This gives the reader a sense of the immense shame surrounding the event for Bowker.

In the collection's next piece, entitled "Notes," the narrator tells us that this same stifled buddy, Norman Bowker, had sent him letters telling him the story and how he wanted to tell it and couldn't and how it created a distance for him back home. In a letter he asked O'Brien, because he was a writer, to tell his story for him. He later committed suicide. O'Brien divulges that after Bowker's suicide he put the story on paper, at first almost to be included in an earlier novel, but eventually in this collection, and hoped it would do the man justice to have his story told. Then he reveals that the story within the story, the awful night in the mud field, actually happened to himself. O'Brien let Kiowa die. He tells us that Bowker's story (the external frame) was Bowker's inability to connect with others after his return and talk about his experiences. The internal story was

about O'Brien's shame. He was using his writing to connect, to tell his own story, in a way that Bowker couldn't.

In a further, interesting turn, the next piece, entitled "In the Field," tells the story of the day after the mud pit battle, searching for Kiowa's body, through the third-person close perspective of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. The narration reports Cross's inner thoughts and feelings throughout the story. During the telling, however, a young soldier is described but not named, acting strangely (perhaps guiltily) in the search for the body, and we eventually come to understand that this soldier is Tim O'Brien, but we see his actions from Cross's point of view.

While these shifts in point of view are between stories, O'Brien also shifts point of view within stories. In a short piece entitled "Enemies," O'Brien narrates the tale of a fight between two of his fellow soldiers, Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk. Soon he begins to tell, still in third person, how Jensen feels after the fight and his increasing fears that Strunk will retaliate for injuring him. He quickly retreats from that inner view and concludes the story from the dramatic point of view.

In another story called "Love," O'Brien describes meeting Lieutenant Cross after the war and how over drinks Cross tells him a story about a girl he was in love with during the war and met up with after he got home. This framed story begins almost as if indirectly quoted, "They'd run into each other, he said, at a college reunion in 1979. Nothing had changed. He still loved her. For eight or nine hours, he said, they spent most of their time together." (28) These are the only two times O'Brien uses the words "he said." The internal story continues for almost two pages, and the reader is left with the

lingering sensation that it is a story Cross is telling O'Brien, but the language used never reverts to this indirect quoting method, and the reader begins to hear of Cross's thoughts and feelings about her during this reunion. The frame is so subtle that the narration's point of view is handed off like a baton from O'Brien to Cross with two subtle uses of indirect attribution. This subtle use of "he said" in these two initial instances allow the narrative point of view to shift smoothly without the need to question whether O'Brien is conjecturing Cross's state of mind.

In the book as a whole, using these point of view variations and shifts, along with two stories, "How To Tell A True War Story" and "Good Form," which directly question the truthfulness of the narration, O'Brien gradually undermines his reliability as a narrator. Subject to various techniques of narrative sleight-of-hand, including rapidly shifting perspectives, the reader begins to lose this footing. Meanwhile, the theme that stands like a rock amid the erosion of the surrounding soil is that the value of a story, the truth of it even, is in its telling.

In conclusion, I will shift here to a brief, more subjective discussion of point of view in my own collection. As I have shown, the conventions of narration provide a full menu of options when it comes to telling a story. I have chosen a few different points of view to tell these stories, from first person past tense, to third person omniscient also past tense, back to first person past, and culminating with a story in the first person present.

In three of my stories, "Low Water," "Prodigal Brother" and "The One," the narration is delivered in first person by the main character, using the past tense for "Low Water" and present tense for "The One." Like King's "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank

Redemption,” my story “Prodigal Brother” is told mainly in the past tense until the end, at which point the story enters the narrative present, and the present tense is therefore used for the narration. The point of view remains constant within these stories, following the guideline of consistency as we have discussed.

It is the third-person story “Zero” where I attempted to apply David Jauss’s advice when it comes to shifting point of view. “Zero” is about a series of terrible events in which the main character, Cy Daily, apparently has been involved and remembers little. When the story begins, we see Cy in an interview room at a police station after being brought in for questioning. The story begins in a dramatic, or objective third person perspective as the interview begins. Mostly through this interview dialogue, we find that Cy’s memory of the events is unclear, but he is able to relate the facts leading up to the tragedy. Deep into the story, the camera zooms in, so to speak, moving the point of view close to Cy so the reader is able to envision the memory with him as it becomes clear in his mind. After this revelation, the point of view floats back out briefly, and follows the interviewing detective into another room for a conversation with his colleague. The point of view follows the colleague back in to witness the next set of questions, and then moves close to Cy again, revealing his sudden awareness of what has happened and the emotions that come with it.

This cinematic style of narration employs primarily a dramatic point of view but relates the consciousness of a single character, which is characteristic of the limited omniscient perspective, and it also roams away from this character in a manner characteristic of editorial omniscience, which is usually defined in part by its ability to

report the thoughts and feelings of more than one character. So this story definitely uses a blend of more than one point of view, but it could also be accurate to say the entire story is told from the omniscient perspective with limitations as to whose consciousness the narration reports. In fact, Jauss mentions that “omniscience” is usually a bit of a misnomer, since we are rarely given the interior consciousness of all characters in a scene, story or novel (40). This would be an overload of information. So the author writing in the third person omniscient point of view is constantly choosing whose consciousness to leave out. I have simply chosen to leave out all but Cy’s. This cinematic style of narration is not unnatural to today’s modern reader, as he or she is accustomed to this kind of conglomeration of narrative views, particularly in television and film. I propose that, provided the reader has a continuous grasp of where the story-telling is coming from and understands the transition in narrative perspective as it happens, he or she is less likely to be jarred out of the story even when this position shifts. This is one of the hallmarks of fiction that works.

**Story 1**

**Low Water**

I am a bastard – literally and figuratively. Two kinds of people have described me this way: the ones who knew my father didn't stay long enough for my mother's belly to outgrow her waistband and the ones who knew me long enough to show me the disdain I deserve. And since names are often omitted to protect the guilty, I'll omit my own in favor of what I've come to accept as a substitute: Bastard. The point is that you start off knowing me and don't foster any false hopes as to what noble acts I may commit in the course of events to follow.

That day started like they all did, just barely chill at the misty yellow-gray of dawn. It would reach the upper nineties before long. The raft-guide zombies scuffed their Tevas and Chacos up to the deck to see who the trip-leader, or TL, was, and who was the sweep-boat and which of the rookies would come along to initiate the confusion. Dragging gear listlessly with one hand and dragging on Camel Lights with the other, they assembled like twenty hopefuls checking the roster to see who made the final cut for the sleepwalking team. The rear-most guides stood on tiptoe to see over the bent shaggy mops in front. I watched from the bench, legs and arms crossed, working on a banana.

I had been up since predawn, early enough to stand naked outside my tent on the bank of the Chonee River below the outpost and consider the day and what it held for me, as was my custom. Watching the smooth water slip by, I had wondered that morning whether the pathetic state of my coworkers would rub off on me like a smudge of algae on a river rock, like a curse. It was an idea that had begun to nag at me, the notion that we worked in some kind of charmed carnival ride, and those customers who came, paid,

rode, and left were mostly immune, but those who lived and worked here were cursed, somehow stuck in an endless loop of mediocrity. I didn't belong. I was smart, self-sufficient, strong. There were others I suspected may have been equally as capable, or nearly so, but they just never got out. They were victims of the curse, and I was starting to worry that I was too.

In the summer of 1995, the Chonee River in East Tennessee was a miracle of socioeconomic schizophrenia, a place where rich college kids and washed-up rednecks rubbed elbows in a seasonal effort to entertain boy scouts, girl scouts, youth groups, corporate stiff, vacationing families, bachelor party drunks and sorority sisters. Guides called these paying customers “gumbies” when they were out of earshot. Occasionally a rare group of intelligent, aggressive gumbies met up with a river guide of professional caliber such as myself, and then, they got something of value. The rest of the time it was the dumb led by the stupid in an outdoor game of Twister with paddles. Multiply that by twelve boats in a trip and you ended up with mayhem.

Picture a flotilla of earnest incompetence, a mosh pit of boats and bodies, bravado and fear. The pristine clockwork of strokes and moves that distinguished a well-executed run disintegrated at the front, and the remaining boats – instead of utilizing their two-boat-length distance from the raft ahead and back-ferrying around the problem – shimmied and squealed and floated directly into the fray, where the river perceived the leadership void and filled it to the rim with madness. Boats pinned against one another in succession until the logjam was complete, and, if it occurred in a strong current, the unlikely became the certain, and a boat (or four) that had seemed stable would show its

shiny, wet bottom to the sky, spilling a thousand pounds of screaming human contents in what we called a “yard sale.”

By the time the other guides slouched to the deck, I had already checked the schedule, double-checked my gear, showered and brushed my teeth in an attempt to prolong the feeling of cleanliness before the hard work began. Our manager – I’ll call him Crewcut – was responsible for dividing the labor based on the gumbie traffic each day. He had stapled the list to the sun-hardened corkboard. Beer would be TL (one of two boats with a first aid kit and the first down the river). I would run sweep, which is the last boat in the train and the other boat with a kit. TL was a post of ultimate responsibility for the group, granted to Beer because, four years earlier, he began taking customer trips two weeks before I did. I had long since compensated for this disparity by proving myself a superior guide, but the system insisted that this distinction should afford him some privilege, and a few more dollars. That’s how it was.

Beer is his name for the sake of my tale because after the consumption of that much of anything, the body necessarily assumes some of the ingested attributes. Two hundred seventy pounds on a friendly scale, shaped like a keg, he exuded the sweet rotten odor of a frat party. And at thirty five, he was a long way from his last frat party, the premature, stray grays peeking from their places in his light brown goatee and above his ears. His thick knees took on a slightly unnatural angle toward each other due to their woeful burden and a litany of football injuries. He stood in the middle of the group in front of the schedule scratching greasy hair and inspecting the list with a knowing squint.

Life awakened in the little mob, and the conversation grew to a burbling murmur as those on the first trip dispersed to the raft loft above the bus to begin loading boats. I slung my banana peel into the woods and climbed the stairs to help out.

In his orientation speech to the gumbies, a whitewater guide always portrays more danger on the river than truly exists. It makes success more exhilarating for the guests. Knowing this allows one to enjoy a yard sale for what it is – a laughable mess of gear bags, water bottles and orphan paddles floating to points unknown, dotted with wet helmets and faces straining and gulping air like fish suddenly given lungs.

The raft barn is a wooden storage area on stilts, with a bus-sized hole in the middle, so boats can be drug directly from the barn onto the top of the bus. While the loading proceeded above, a group of gumbies materialized at the appointed time on the gravel below, next to the bus. They were too eager for the time of day and giddy with nerves that made them laugh easily, albeit uncomfortably, at the string of clichés that peppered Beer’s safety speech. Laughter intermittently sputtered up through the boards of the loft, and, without hearing Beer’s words, we could tell when he was wrapping up by the rhythm of their muffled reactions. I was the last one down and walked by the eyelets where the ropes were tied off, securing the boats to the roof of the bus. The knots were all screwed up.

“Crap. It’s going to be one of those,” I said to myself. I secured the ropes and made for the door to the already rumbling bus, curious to discover which one of my colleagues had tied those jacked-up knots. They slouched in the rear of the bus, so I side-

stepped down the center, past the friendly faces of gumbies and their awkwardly stowed paddles, looking to tear somebody a new one.

“Who tied those ropes?” I hissed, trying not to ruin the illusion for the gumbies, who might yet get back alive. Four fingers pointed at Bong, so-named for the three-foot, glass instrument of mood music (as he called it) that was gingerly drawn from beneath his bunk and used with abandon every night. As he sluggishly lifted his sun-bleached-blond mop, I realized his forays into chemical experimentation had this morning stretched into new territory. I had heard of people guiding high before, but, by the look in Bong’s eyes, this was not pot. I sat down in the seat next to him on the back row, knowing no lecture on proper rope-tying would penetrate.

“What are you doing?” I shoved my paddle, vest, helmet and rope bag behind the seat and waited for him to process.

“Hey Bastard,” he mumbled through a half grin, “I sent a postcard this morning.”

This was Bong’s term for dropping acid. It was a rare treat for him, and it usually accompanied a night of strumming on his poorly tuned Washburn. But dropping in the morning was a first and didn’t bode well for the trip. If he wasn’t the best guide in the whole company, I probably would have turned him in right there. Truth was, though, if anybody could pull it off, Bong probably could, so I left it alone.

“You tell anybody else, I’ll kill you,” I said. “And don’t screw up or you’re done.” I harbored a hope that while his attention to detail was obviously out to lunch, as evidenced by the knots, maybe he could steer a raft to the take-out and keep six people alive in the process. He’d been doing it for a while. Trained at eighteen-years-old, Bong

had guided flawlessly for four years, and when he wasn't doing whitewater for work, he was in a kayak "creekin'," which is running severe creeks at flood stage, one of the most dangerous extreme sports in existence. The fact that he was still alive meant he could push some rubber five miles in his sleep. He'd be fine, probably.

I turned my head from Bong, who had already regained his catatonic state, to see a slender, graceful arm draped over the green vinyl seat-back ahead of me. The arm was attached to a finely muscled shoulder, sun-kissed by the late July rays, under the ruggedly handsome face of our prettiest female guide, Bullshit. She went without makeup and was gifted with the hottest figure on the river. But let's be frank. I'd give up an hour of staring at Bullshit's chiseled slate of abs to prevent one minute of hearing the crap that regularly flowed from her mouth.

Then, there was also her thickheaded boyfriend Rocky, who spoke with the inflections of the title character in the eponymous movie and had, likewise, been hit too many times.

Once, as a boy, I asked my mother what my father was like. Since she hadn't known him too long, she stuck with the physical details. Her description of my sperm donor fixed in my mind, nothing more than a blurry shape, but one I would remember any time a real person came into view that fit the description. Rocky had that shape: a thick, muscled torso that tapered to thin short legs. He probably never knew that his physique stacked the deck against him from the moment we met.

They came to our outpost as a couple. I don't know how long they had dated. After a few encounters, I couldn't get the names out of my head, Rocky and Bullshit, just like the cartoon duo.

Bullshit would lie even when it was useless. "It's gonna be hot today, Bastard," she said.

"Did you hear the weather report on the way in?" I asked, knowing she wouldn't hesitate to lie about it.

"Yeah," she said. "Hotter than yesterday. Chance of scattered thunderstorms, but you know how that goes."

"Yeah, no telling if that'll hit us," I said.

Summer storms were common and rarely amounted to much. They were gone just as quickly as they appeared, and in July it was hot enough that you appreciated the cooler rain. When you are parched and sweating, sitting on scorching rubber, you'd think being surrounded by the river would cool things down, allow for a quick dip to refresh and an occasional sip to quench your adamant thirst. It is a painful illusion.

On the Alahat River in western North Carolina, the water releases from the base of the dam, where it is cool. There the river water stays below sixty degrees year around. But on the Chonee, water pours over the top of the dam where it is warmest. In the hottest months, it felt like old bath water. And you would only drink it if you longed for a couple days of IV treatment at Schiller County Medical Center. There were microbes in there with long names and pissy dispositions that disagree with the standard-issue intestinal tract. Beer drank from the river often.

“I got some extra water if anybody needs it,” said College. He was just what my mother would have wanted in a son. Tall, athletic build, dark hair, a bright, guileless face, dotted with patches of two-day stubble, not too many years from their debut. College was impossible to hate but not substantial enough to like. He wanted to learn the job, wanted people not just to survive but also to enjoy, and wanted us to like him. But he was a first-year, and rookies sucked and made my job hard.

“Thanks, College,” I said. “Hey, is Wally coming today? How are the rest of the Cleavers?” His smile evaporated. He turned to watch the road curl by. I knew he’d still let me have some if I needed it. But unprepared I was not. I don’t let myself get in positions that require ass-kissing. I had filled my camelback with icy water like I did every morning. Someone else could take advantage of College’s generosity. Someone like Fear.

Fear sat next to College and took up a little more room. By title, she was a first-year, but she had stretched the typical six or seven-week training period into three full years before she checked out. She was tall, middle-aged and sixty pounds overweight. She tossed around her long, sandy hair as a point of pride. She wore a bikini two sizes too small and commented occasionally about depraved oglers peeking at her ample cleavage, when they were probably just men noting the loose bulge of cottage cheese that hung over her waistband.

“Checking out” is the term applied to the final training trip in which a trainee who has demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the river will take down a group of customers with a trainer in the boat to observe. Typically, the guide demonstrates a reasonable

ability to keep cool under pressure, navigate the tough spots and make customers happy. A judgment is made, and if the guide “checks out,” he or she will join the work force and start getting paid to drive gumbies.

Fear had taken three check-out trips, all of which had resulted in calamity. Two were in her first year, one in her second. In all three, the observer was forced to take over, and Crewcut had refunded the gumbies. Finally, after a third year of riding the training boat, pushing rubber for no pay, Fear asked for another check-out, and you will never convince me that she didn't check out from blind luck or pity. She knew the river well. That wasn't the problem. The Viking physique under her fluffy padding of fat was strong enough to get the job done. No, it was her head that got in the way, her uncontrollable despair. I'm all for people facing their fears, but for God's sake, if you have a phobia of drowning, do not become a raft guide. At the first sign of trouble, Fear's voice would grow shrill, her words stuttering and meaningless. In her first season as a paid guide, many of us were accustomed to the sight of a boat parked securely on a rock, Fear in the back, on the guide seat, blaring like an air raid siren, and gumbies with puzzled expressions performing various paddle strokes at random.

“You're such an ass,” Fear said, defending College.

“Yes, but at least not a murderer.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You. Murderer. Simply by coming to work every day. You just haven't realized your destiny yet.”

“I hate you, Bastard.”

“Tell him, babe,” said a sorority chick from a nearby seat. Clearly this gumbie didn’t know she was a potential victim. Fear’s comment – and the rallying support – had been loud enough to attract attention, so I left it there. It was a conversation we’d had before. I assumed we would have it again and again, until she did kill somebody and would have to leave. As it turned out, we never did.

Rocky glowered from his seat. He was older than Bullshit. His career as a police officer had ended early after an accidental shooting. I wouldn’t have known this except that he’d spilled on me one night last season after a couple hours with a bottle of George Dickel by himself in his cabin. Bullshit had gone to see her mother, leaving Rocky solo, and, after getting fully soused alone, he had obeyed the compulsion to roam, stumble, and divulge that often goes with hammeredness. He had staggered down to my tent, loudly enough to be heard on the trail. So I emerged to greet his hulking mass poking a stick at a burnt soda can in the glowing remnants of my campfire. On another night, I would likely have shooed him away, but I recognized the reek of whiskey, and, when people get like that, sometimes you find out things that come in handy. So, I listened to his pathetic tale of a dark street and a stupid teen who picked a bad time to reach for his cell phone. Not likely to be useful, but it explained the look on Rocky’s face when I used the term “murderer” so loosely.

These people comprised our team. The early morning run was sometimes smaller than the max of twelve boats. Ours was seven. Within another twenty minutes, the bus was unloaded at the put-in, and the rafts were arranged in a line on the gravel beach, with six or seven gumbies in each crew, all members of the same national sorority, sitting on

the rafts practicing the strokes as they were called by the guides. Five commands: All Forward, All Back, Left Back, Right Back, and Brace.

Beer and I had finished our short training sessions. We had honed our speeches for efficiency. We waited for the other guides to coach and correct until they felt their crews could safely run the five-mile line to the bottom. The sun was already starting to move toward its place in the center of the sky, and the temperature climbed perceptibly. Beer flirted amiably with his passengers. I ignored mine. They were strangers, and I'd never see them again after a few hours, so what was the point?

I strode over to the bathroom, more to check on Bong than to piss. On the way by, I could hear his nonsense and see the incredulity on his gumbies' faces.

“You've got to feel the water, y'know? Just put that oar in and pull. When you do it right, you're connected, see? You and the water, man. Don't be scared. Are you scared?”

They nodded.

“No, no, don't be scared. See, the water is your friend. The rocks too. They can hurt you if you don't connect, but ... it's like a puppy. A puppy can hurt a little, but it doesn't mean to. And once you connect with that puppy, it's your best friend forever. See?”

“Are you high or just weird?” said front left gumbie. She was skeptical. The other five were in love.

He'd be okay. He was high as a bat, but, if eighty percent of your crew will follow you into unknown froth and spray, they'll listen carefully enough to survive.

“I’m high on life,” Bong said, flashed his ivories and winked, thus sealing the deal.

On the way back from the bathroom, I could hear snippets of the other guides wrapping up their talks as I walked past each boat.

“...at full volume will reach speeds of nearly forty miles an hour, but we don’t have enough water for that today,” said Bullshit to her group of gullible followers.

Beer: “Your eyes are freakin’ me out, they’re so blue! Amanda right? I won’t forget that...”

Rocky: “Remember, if I yell ‘Brace!’ that means we’re in for some chop, and if you don’t brace, rock meets face.” Three girls touched their mouths unconsciously.

Fear: “...and the sixth command is ‘Get in the Floor.’ You’ll probably hear it once or twice today. Just get your paddles straight up and get as low as you can in the boat...”

I could hear College, but his words came straight from any of the area’s weekend tourist brochures, so no sense repeating them here.

At Beer’s signal, the paddles were thrown into the boats, which were then hoisted to the shoulders and carried down the ramp around the dam, down to where we would enter the current. This was my favorite part of the day. I was last, so I had time to leave the group waiting and go to the part of the concrete platform closest to the dam. This was where the water showed its power, tumbling down the dam’s face. The water smashed at the river bed, producing a cool mist and the sound of thunder. My skinny legs and arms grew goose bumps as I stood looking up at the wall of white. The thunder was all-

consuming, filling my head. The water was why we were all here. It shaped the river bed. It spun the turbines in the TVA electric plant. It filled the arena of adventure. It pushed things along.

I closed my eyes and considered. The energy was more than kinetic. It went beyond physics. It was a power that could move more than silt and stone. It moved my soul. And the apathy that clung to those who worked here – that curse – held no sway against the driving force of the rushing flow. All moved before it.

The Tennessee Valley Authority kept a tight leash on water release. You could set your watch by it. I guess, in my experience, I had come to appreciate things that you could count on. The water would come pouring over the dam promptly at nine, and, right at five, it would stop. But you knew that the next day it would be there for you. I needed that kind of assurance.

Then it was time to go. We put our boat in the knee-deep, tepid eddy. The gumbies stepped gingerly in, and after one push on the stern, I jumped onto my seat, hollered for two strokes forward and started the adventure.

The first half of the ride was smooth. The rookies were doing their jobs, the Zeta Etas (or whatever) were doing theirs, and before too long, we had passed over a dozen rapids with names like Triage, Widowmaker, and Triple Ripple (much more than a ripple, I promise). Each rapid has a name, a class of difficulty/danger (1 to 6), and a story behind it, and my routine remained unbroken all the way to the halfway point, known as Sleepy Time, where the current slows, the river deepens, and the gumbies take stock of their experience so far.

All of ours that morning were enjoying themselves. They weren't as nervous as when they had begun. Except for Fear's crew. I had seen it happen in a squirrely spot between Smash-and-Grab and Crossbow. Her boat had been stuck briefly on a rock, just long enough for the crew to turn in their seats and look back to see what their guide was doing to correct it. Just a pinch of the panic that Fear worked so hard to contain leaked out through her face, a brief flash reminiscent of a big calf in the branding cradle, white-eyed and wide-nostriled, and her crew immediately knew they were not as safe as they had once thought.

Our little rubber armada floated along the brown, rocky banks under a loose canopy of tall pines and arching hardwoods. The gumbies splashed and chatted. The guides looked on, taking the occasional stroke to keep the boats in the middle where the current was stronger. It was downright hot by then, and I knew it would only get hotter. I took a sip of water from my camelback and looked up to gauge the time. Apparently, Bullshit had been truthful about the forecast. A deep black cloud came into view over the western ridge of the gorge. It was moving swiftly and had the greenish hue of a nasty storm. We were going to get it, no doubt; the question was how soon would it be over?

The rain started when we were near the end of Sleepy Time. It came rushing across the water in a clearly discernable sheet. One moment, the sun still shone around the side of the thunderhead, and the next, it was gray and dark, and the fat rain drops were coming thick enough to run into each other on the way down. The gumbies looked around at each other, not knowing if there was something to do. Normally, a rain like this would send them scattering to shelter, eager to protect their hair or clothes. The confused

looks settled as they realized they were already wet, the rain was warm, and they weren't going anywhere but downstream anyway. Bong stood up on the back of his raft, arms outstretched, face to the sky.

“I am cleeeeeeeeeeean!” he yelled. His five adoring fans checked out his body while they had the opportunity.

Then something changed.

The still air began to move against our wet cheeks. Stronger and warmer it blew, until it pushed our party of boats, our bodies like thick sails, away from our desired line, which should have led us into the next rapid, Ledges.

The screams started like popcorn in the bag. One here, one there, slowly but quickening in frequency.

“Owww! That hurt!” A surprised gumbie in my boat dropped the grip on her paddle with one hand and nursed a welt on her shoulder.

“Ouch!” yelled one in Fear's raft. A tick tacking sound began, and I swiveled my head, looking for what could be the problem.

The trouble with hail in a rainstorm on a boat is that, if you look to the water, you never see the ice. It makes the same plopping splash as a fat raindrop. It wasn't until I focused in our boat that I saw them, dozens of white gumballs bouncing off the rubber raft, plastic helmets (hence the tick tacking), and exposed skin.

“What the f ... aaaahhouch!” I yelled. A good-sized hailstone grazed the tip of my nose, focusing my attention on more practical concerns, like pain. The wind blew harder and almost hot, and, without being led or paddled, all seven boats blew to the bank,

pushed there by the power of the wind, which now hurled a million hailstones amidst swelling thunder.

I wasted no time. I hopped out to the shore, shouted some instructions, and by the time the first bolt of lightning forced a bit of piss into my trunks, my crew and I had overturned the boat on the bank and huddled under it to escape the sting of ice. The last of the seven boats had done the same when the lightning hit. Three good bolts, somewhere close, because there was no time between the light and the sound. My gumbies were crying and moaning. I really did pee a little bit. I'm not kidding, it was terrifying. I hadn't seen any data on how safe you are, soaking wet in a lightning storm huddled near trees on a riverbank, but I was betting death was not outside the realm of possibility.

Just as quickly as the storm came, it left. But the gumbies were done.

Casual inspection of our sorority girls would convince even the most obtuse observer that there would be no more rafting for Iota Gotta Rho. Beer got my attention and indicated he would get up to the road, flag one of our later tours and get word to our bus driver.

Luckily the bus arrived after ten or fifteen minutes, but the road there wasn't set up for the logistics of loading seven rafts in traffic, so we herded the gumbies onto the bus, and Beer decided we'd have to one-man each raft to the take-out, so we could keep them on the river for the next trip. The gumbies would go back to the outpost. By the time the doors slapped shut and we waved goodbye forever, the sun was back out, and we were well on our way to the nineties as forecasted. The distant rumble of thunder

remained in the wake of the dwindling bus to remind us of the storm as we picked our way back down to the boats.

I'd never one-manned a raft before. Most of us hadn't. We kept the group tight, and our new experience made for lively conversation. The next rapid, Ledges, is a wide mile-long course of shallows with only a few deeper channels, so, soon we were immersed in the hard work of steering and paddling through the various gates and ledges. At the end of Ledges, we headed down Roostertail, where the river drops a total of fifty vertical feet very quickly into a gorge steep enough so the road must climb high above it, and the sheer rock walls make easy access by land nearly impossible. This is where we noticed the change.

“Something's different!” Beer yelled back to us. “I'm seeing new rocks!”

“Me too!” shouted Bullshit. “Rocky, do you see?”

“What?” Fear was stuck on a rock. She seemed surprised. I wasn't surprised at all, until I saw that the rock she was stuck on was usually a foot underwater. I drifted past her, processing the new information, looking for other evidence to confirm my budding hypothesis. There were many other newly exposed rocks, still wet from their previous place under the water's surface.

“These aren't new rocks guys,” I yelled, “just less water.” Ten more yards and I passed College's boat stuck on a gate rock to what was usually the next rapid, Continental, named for the massive boulder that divided the current in two, the left side pouring into a hydraulic called Hap's Hole. The right side barely had enough water to

float through now, so I punched left through the hole, which was shaped differently with the change in water volume.

Some rapids get meaner at lower water. Hap's Hole was a sticky hydraulic already, but now it was worse. I pulled through it with a few hard strokes and headed left into the eddy there in the shade of the cliff where Beer, Rocky, and Bullshit were waiting, wondering what to do.

"This never happens," Rocky said. "Not in the middle of the day. The water is running out from under us. Something must have triggered the sluice gate."

"It was that storm I bet," said College. "That went through almost an hour ago. If lightning hit their computer and tripped the sluice gate, the end of the water would hit us here right about this time."

It made sense. The question was, how long would it stay this way?

Beer sat on his raft and pulled out his waterproof cigarette case. "It'll come back on," he said. "Probably is back on. We just have to wait for the lull to pass."

"I'm not waiting," I said. "There's no telling how long that will take."

"Nobody's going anywhere right now, you ass," Rocky said. "You want to end up looking like Bong?" He gestured toward Bong to prove the point. Bong had run aground on a reef that would normally have been the proper route but was now just a few inches of water gurgling down a wide, flat shelf. Not to be discouraged, he remained in his guide seat paddling patiently, seemingly unaware that he was making no progress. His fiberglass paddle made rhythmic scraping sounds on the rough rock.

It was a good point, but I was starting to feel the oppressive threat of that curse, hovering over me like a specter.

“Guys! I can’t get unstuck!” Fear had that doomed cow look again. She yanked on the strap that lined the rim of her raft, as though this motion could somehow undo her predicament. College had a more resigned posture, sitting on his boat, looking up where Fear was beached.

“Chill out,” said Beer, drawing contentedly on his Marlboro Red, “you’ll be fine. College, can you see what she’s stuck on from where you are at?”

“My bet’s on a rock,” I said. College took over the therapy session with Fear, and Beer shifted his stare to me.

“I’ve had about enough of your mouth, Bastard,” he said.

“Yeah,” agreed Rocky. “Your skinny ass is a long way from civilization to be talking as much trash as you do.”

“You really are going to wait here until the water comes back, aren’t you?” I leveled my eyes at Beer. Rocky’s threat was not lost on me, but I figured I could clamp my tongue long enough to keep from receiving a corn-fed, country beat-down right here on the bank.

“You’re damn straight I am,” Beer said. And that was that. Rocky and Bullshit started consoling each other and speaking in low tones, and Bong kept paddling.

“It’s weird, man,” he said. “It’s like the rocks are moving like water, and the water is as still as stone.”

About then, Fear finally followed one of College's instructions, and her boat shifted into the tiny current that remained. Like a tired ox she slouched into her seat waiting to see where it would carry her. Seeing that Fear was freed, College hopped onto a rock, shoved his boat into the same current ahead of her, and sprung into his back seat ready to make adjustments with his paddle. His raft slipped down a trough into Hap's Hole, which was much smaller, but still sticky. Because of the shape of the hydraulic and the weight distribution of his raft, Hap's Hole held the craft in place, in spite of his efforts to paddle on. He didn't see Fear's boat slide in above him, heading toward his spot.

"College!!" we shouted, but it was too late to prevent physics from doing its thing. Fear's heavier boat struck down perfectly on College's back seat, the lowest and heaviest point on his boat, and his empty front end tipped up high like a motorcycle wheelie. College's seat then caught the majority of the current pouring into the hydraulic, which caused it to dive under. He only had one place to go, into the drink.

"You idiot!" yelled Bullshit at Fear, who had dropped her paddle and sat immovable as a stone in her boat with both hands slapped to her cheeks, mouth slightly open, staring at the water, waiting for College to come up. She drifted through the hydraulic without effort.

College rose to the surface ahead of Fear. A tinge of stress remained on his face, and he began to pick careful steps through the thigh deep pool, trying not to step in a pothole. Naturally carved in rock by years of current, a pothole could ruin your day in a hurry. People had drowned in swift, shallow water, simply from falling downstream with their leg hung in a pothole.

Fear glided in behind him, still self-absorbed. When her boat struck his back, it wasn't moving very fast, but it didn't need to be. College went under again, stumbling on the submerged rocks, and Fear's boat drifted over him and stopped next to ours. College thrashed out from under the other side of the raft, gulped air and then screamed louder than I'd ever heard. It echoed through the gorge to the now-blue sky above. I ran across the thwarts of the boats, past Fear's useless form. She was muttering to herself but not moving to help. I grabbed the lapels of College's life jacket.

He said, "Nooo!" but I was already in motion, and dragged him out of the water onto her raft. He screamed again and slid into the floor of the boat, one leg draped over the side, which was smeared with blood. I moved that leg to see where the blood was coming from and glimpsed bone. College's other leg was not over the side because it was folded under in the floor of the boat. Both tibia and fibula were penetrating the skin, and bleeding slowly onto the wet blue rubber, making a purple pool under his leg. It was as though he had a second knee in the middle of his shin. He was crying loudly.

Beer rushed in. "Holy shit! Okay, back up, back up. I know what I'm doing."

I backed up, staring at the harried movements of Beer, whose huge form thankfully shielded me from what I had seen. I kept backing away from the calamity of the other guides as they began to shout instructions and questions.

"Help me get him out of this boat!"

"Here, use my webbing as a tourniquet!"

"We don't need a tourniquet!"

"Splint, a splint. Use the paddles!"

“Bastard, what are you doing?! Don’t just stand there!”

I kept moving away. I couldn’t help. Not that I didn’t know what to do. I had every form of first-responder and swift-water rescue training you could get. That wasn’t it. They didn’t need me. Or at least what they needed didn’t come in a first aid kit. I realized that. Something else I realized was this: at what might have been a galvanizing moment for our group, I hated them more than ever before. I was sure that a curse was on us. It hung over us, and I could almost feel it. I could see the pain it caused made real in College’s face clenched toward the sun. And the water that could have countered it, that could have brought him swiftly to safety, that could have prevented it from happening at all, had run out from under us. The curse wouldn’t end there. I knew it was just a foretaste of forever. My only chance was to do what my father had taught me so well. Get gone.

I turned and started walking. I picked my steps down the rocks until the bank ran out. Then I leaned into the current and started swimming. About two hundred yards downstream, I made the other bank at a low spot past the cliff and climbed out of the water. I turned one last time and peered into the shade where they were huddled. Bong still sat there in his boat but had stopped paddling. He just sat there looking at me. The look on his face cried out for me to help him, too. Get him out of there. But I could only save myself. That’s what bastards do.

He waved slowly, and I waved back. Then I turned and hiked up the hill to the road. I flagged a Jeep, hitched to the outpost, gathered one bag-full of clothes and threw it in the back of my pickup. I told Crewcut to get help down to the gorge and exactly where,

and before he could ask me what I was doing, I pulled away. I drove out of the river basin, past my hometown where my mother lived and kept right on going. And I didn't look back again.

It's been fifteen years, and I bet they're still sitting there in low water. I know I am.

THE END

**Story 2**

**Zero**

A tall man in a black suit entered the gray-tiled room where Cy Daily was sitting at a plain wooden table, took a seat in the chair opposite him and pressed the record button on a large tape recorder. The black box on the center of the tabletop with its cobra-like microphone was the only other object in the room. The man reached into his hip pocket, placed a badge on the corner of the table, and leaned back into the creaking chair.

“Interview of Mr. H. Cy Daily, 6:30 p.m., May 5, 1990. Mr. Daily, what is your date of birth?”

“Why’d you bring me here?” Cy asked. He had been sitting in this room since he arrived, but even the trip over was a hazy mess.

“We took a statement from you at your home, but it was incomplete. We wanted to give you some time to gather your thoughts and try again, but with our equipment this time.” He made a slight wave at the tape recorder. “My name is Officer Daniels, you may remember.”

Cy didn’t remember. He didn’t remember the statement either, didn’t remember driving here. He remembered the gunshots, and Zero, and RayRay the little dirty corn husk, and then nothing, then this room.

“So you just need another statement?”

“Please. We need as much detail as possible. So I need you to be forthcoming about everything you remember.”

Cy didn’t like this man. Though he was confused at being told by a stranger that they had already met, he was sure there was something about him he already didn’t like. The set of his jaw, maybe. Something in his business-casual style seemed put on, like the

shiny, thin tie he wore. His bland face, barely hiding what could be hate, but was at least pity, made Cy feel like a child caught drinking milk straight out of the jug.

“O.K. I’ll try.”

“Thank you, Mr. Daily. Let’s begin. Please state your name and date of birth.”

“H. Cy Daily. August 14, 1945. VJ Day.”

“Quite a day to be born.”

“Yeah, Homer was a Navy vet. It was a big deal for him. He got shot up right before it was over and came home.”

“Homer is your father.”

“Right. Was my father. He’s passed on.”

Cy thought of his so-called father, missing a foot, thanks to a 20mm round from a Japanese ‘Zero,’ the nickname for Japan’s favored Mitsubishi A6M fighter aircraft. A strafing bullet had caught him running across the deck and put him on his ass and his foot in the sea. He had healed up in a Navy hospital and returned just in time to find a newly pregnant wife back home. Homer had been gone for two years, but they agreed to keep up appearances.

Cy thought all the beatings were his fault – his and the whiskey’s. But then the big sailor died. The bullet got him started, and the whiskey finished him off. One night Homer put his bumper into a train overpass at seventy miles per hour. When Cy’s mother told him the news, he had grabbed her and wept into her shoulder. She told him everything. He told no one. He was just a big, goofy son-of-a-whore, good-for-nothing bastard. Mostly he hadn’t told because he was ashamed of the relief he felt to be rid of his

old man. He had wondered if she felt it too, that guilty, secret relief that covered his grief like a thick, warm blanket.

Cy scratched at his chest absently. He looked down at his T-shirt, clammy with hours-old sweat. He felt tired, grimy, and achy, like he was bruised all over. He fingered a hole in his shirt under his right arm, discovering a bandage taped to his rib cage. A dot of blood spoke of an injury and treatment he couldn't recall.

“What is your occupation?”

“Electrician, but I haven't been getting much work.”

“How long have you been in the wiring business?”

“Since high school. I did my apprentice work, then got certified, and was on my own by the time I was twenty-three.”

“Big home for an electrician.” Daniels' right eyebrow went up almost to his hairline.

“Well sir, I don't mind saying that the house has been in the family for two generations before me.”

“So it was passed to you. I see.”

“Yeah, I lived over near Birchwood for a few years till Mom took sick.”

“Cancer?”

“Right. Lungs. They sent her home and said they couldn't help her anymore, and I needed to help her, so I moved in. I decided to rewire the old place 'cause it needed it. By the time I had it finished, she was gone.”

“Mercifully quick then.”

“Yeah, I guess. Quicker than they told us when they sent her home.”

“But I guess people have died quicker, haven’t they?” The eyebrow went up.

That look again. Cy couldn’t place it. Couldn’t figure out why it was there.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, officer.”

“No, that’s right. I don’t guess you do.” Daniels shifted in his seat and crossed his legs. “What were you doing today around three o’clock?”

“I was in the garden with my adze, breaking up the dirt for a new run o’ beans.”

“Adze. Is that a brand of tiller?”

“No, no. I do it the old-fashioned way. It’s like a heavy hoe with a little root-chopping blade on the other end. Pretty useful tool.”

“It would seem so. I think I’ve seen one like you’re describing, now that you mention it. What happened while you were gardening?”

“I’d just put some water out for Zero, and it wasn’t long ‘fore he came scooting out across the yard, spit slinging off his jaw, ‘cause he’d been drinking from the bowl. He’s always figuring out how to get out of his pen. He shimmied under the fence on the Perkins’ side – that’s my neighbors – and made off into their yard. I live over in Mahan Gap, west of Cleveland. Big place. The Perkins live up...”

“I was there this afternoon, Mr. Daily.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”

“Zero is your dog? Medium-sized boxer, one white paw?”

“Yeah. That was him. You saw what they did then.” Cy’s fingers tensed on his knees.

“As I said, I was there this afternoon. But we need to take it easy. Don’t get ahead of me here. Was it unusual for Zero to run off like that?”

“Well, no. But, when I heard the gunshot, I knew something was wrong.”

“How many shots were there?”

“Just the one. Small. Like a firecracker.”

“Why did one little shot make you think something was wrong?”

“Well, Ray and I aren’t the friendliest of neighbors. He’d already told me he’d kill Zero. That’s why I made the pen for him in the first place. It’s a shame, big old dog like that on fifteen acres and can’t run around like God intended. But he didn’t know any better, and I did, so I had to make him a corral.

“How did Mr. Perkins warn you?”

Cy heaved a sigh and leaned his head back, looking at the ceiling.

“It really got started with the calf. The hounds took it up a notch.”

“When?”

“Maybe seven or eight years ago. Ray had decided to raise his own beef. He made a little shed right by his trailer, so he could be close enough to it, and put a young calf in it. That poor animal must have been just weaned. It lowed night and day for its mother, and didn’t have but a few square feet to move around in.

“This was back when I was working a lot more. I had to wake up pretty early every day, and needed my sleep. At the same time, my fiancée, Denise, was starting to get wandering eyes. We’d been fighting a bit, and I was all wound up. Nothing worse

than waking up to that calf at all hours, empty house, empty spot beside me on the bed. I needed sleep, but wasn't getting any."

"What did you do about it?"

"Nothing. Waited it out. The calf grew up. They slaughtered it I guess. Not a bit too soon, though. One night, I went to bed thinking if it woke me up, one way or another, it would be the last time, but not a peep. They must have hauled it off to slaughter that day."

"So you didn't confront him about it?"

"No, but I saw him out in the driveway one day and shouted over something like, 'Sounds like you got rid of that calf.' And he says, 'Sounds like you're glad about it.' Well I figured no sense being coy about it. It was gone after all. He must have known it was bothering me then, and I thought maybe the noise was tiresome to him, too. So I said, 'Yeah, I thought I'd never sleep with all that racket.' And he says, 'It's a free country,' and goes back to what he was doing. It wasn't an argument or a fight, but I guess that's when I knew we'd never be friendly neighbors."

"What about the hounds?"

"A few years later, Ray took to coon-hunting. So he up and bought four pure-bred blue tick hounds and kept them in wood crates right out near my fence, almost like to get them as close to my house as he could. Those damn dogs would bay at the moon all night long. Every so often, Ray or the wife, Pattie, would come out on the deck and yell 'Shutup!' as if that would work on a miserable creature in a three foot box."

“What’s worse, them damn kids, the bigger ones, A.J. and RayRay, had grown up enough to get out of the house on their own. And they were growing up mean. They’d sneak around and pick on the dogs for fun. I stood on my back porch one day and watched the younger one, A.J. – I guess he was five or six – poking in them boxes with a stick. They’d yelp, and he’d laugh, and he’d poke another one, and before long, they’d be all riled up and barking. Finally, I shouted at the little cuss to quit. He looked across the yard up at my porch, watched me for a second and then gave me the finger and jabbed one of the dogs one more time, just to make a point. They were pitiful, unhappy things. And they were keeping me up all hours, just like that calf had. After a few weeks, I saw Ray out working on his truck. Pattie was inside with the babies just screaming, and the boys were off making trouble elsewhere, so I went over to talk man-to-man.”

“Did it get physical?”

“No. No. I just told him his animals were miserable and keeping me up at night, and if he didn’t know how to straighten it out, I’d have to help him with it. He crinkled his brow and straightened up a bit and said something like, ‘Why don’t let’s find out what happens if you come over here with bad intentions. That dog of yours runs loose a little too much, Cy. I’d hate to have to put a stop to that. I’m over here doing my thing. You just keep you and yours over on your side, and everything will go right along as it should.’”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. Zero was just getting big, an overgrown puppy really. I just kept an eye on Ray and his boys from then on. He got tired of hunting, eventually, and got rid of the

dogs. I made a pen right then, though. I figured him to follow through with what he said about Zero.”

“Did anything else happen?”

“Well, not really with Ray. We never spoke much after that. I saw them boys up to no good a time or two, though. Mean, I’m telling ya.

This one time, the older one, RayRay was out shooting at squirrels with a BB gun he’d got for Christmas. He was all decked out in camo, buckknife in his belt, big orange hunting cap on, a real hunter, you know, all ten years of him. He hit a squirrel on a limb pretty high up, and it fell to the ground out near my fence. I was in the den and saw it through the window, so I stopped and watched to see what he’d do.

“Well, it turns out the squirrel wasn’t dead, it was just knocked silly. It was laying on its back, just pumping its little legs, like it was still running to get away, going nowhere fast. Well RayRay just thought that was a hoot. He starts laughing and looks around like he wants someone else to see what’s going on. He gets down close to it, watching that poor thing run its last race, and then, in a blink, RayRay’s got his buck knife out, and he puts the tip of the blade to the middle of that little creature’s belly.”

Cy pointed his index finger straight to the middle of his other palm in demonstration. The officer, wearing a look of mild curiosity, held his breath.

“And he pushed the blade in, slowly, down to the hilt, smiling that devil grin all the while.”

“Sick,” Daniels said. His chair creaked an echo as the officer adjusted his position.

“Sick is right. He stood up and started pointing at it. Pointing and laughing, while the squirrel was pinned to the ground, still trying to get somewhere. The squirrels legs slowed down gradually. When they stopped altogether, RayRay lost interest, pulled his knife out and wiped it off on his camos and ran off somewhere. Left the squirrel right there.”

“And you didn’t say anything to the Perkins about this?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. He’d have just reminded me it was a free country, mind my own business. That’s just what I did. Made me want to bring Zero indoors though. I wish I had, now.”

“So when you heard the shot this morning, what did you do?”

“I high-tailed it over to the house. I took my adze with me. It wasn’t a gun, but I had it in my hands doing the gardening and thought it would be better to bring than leave behind.”

“What did you see when you approached the house?”

“Well the barn door was open.”

“Ray doesn’t have a barn.”

“Well, no. That’s what I call it. It looks like a big sliding barn door, in the crawlspace area underneath Ray’s house. The house is a single-wide trailer, set up on a block foundation on the side of a hill. The house has about three add-on parts. Most god-awful-looking thing. Lord knows why he put a trailer on a block foundation that high. The slope makes a kind of half basement crawl space under there, where he keeps tools and yard equipment. He put a wide door on the front of the block wall, on rails to slide

open and shut, so he could pull a lawn tractor in there. Keeps it padlocked most of the time.

“Anyway, I came over the fence in a hurry, but it’s a big yard, and when I got over to his side of the fence, another shot popped, a little rifle by the sound, coming from right under the trailer. That big door was wide open.”

“Did you go right in?”

“Yeah. It was sunny, bright as can be, and I couldn’t see under there in the shadows, but I came flyin’ in there all the same. That dog’s all I got.”

“What did you see inside?”

“It took a while for my eyes to adjust, and it was dry and cool and dark in there. I heard their babies screaming in up above my head in the house. Pattie up there cussing and yelling. I smelt burnt gunpowder, thick in the air, and the first thing I saw was Zero laying there, twitching a little. I didn’t see any holes, but I knew somebody had shot him.”

“What else did you see?”

“I looked up and a little deeper in, Ray’s standing there empty-handed, lookin’ terrible serious. A little ways away up the dirt bank, RayRay was standing up, his head almost touching one of the I-beams under the trailer. He’s short for twelve years. A grown man would have to hunch a bit up in there. He had a .22 rifle in his hands, and the weirdest blank look on his face. Hollow. Empty. You’d a thought he’d have an emotion or something after shooting somebody’s dog and then coming face to face with them,

caught in the act. But he was just staring at me. I'd have thought he was a robot if his eyes weren't puffy, and cheeks all ruddy and wet like he'd just stopped crying."

"Then what?"

"Ray starts talking. All reasonable and pleasant - honey in his voice. But he looked like he meant what he was saying. 'We had to put him down, Cy,' he says. 'I know what it looks like. I know I warned you before. But that dog was crazy. Rabies is what it was. Ain't that right RayRay.' And RayRay doesn't even blink. 'Yes, sir. He was snarling and foaming at the mouth.'"

Cy closed his eyes then and saw Zero laying on the dry dirt next to the open door of the basement. His lids were half open and his breath was rapid and weak. A trickle of dark blood ran from under his side, parting with a mat of reddish brown fur, pooling in a paw print in the cool earth. His mouth was dripping with saliva, not foam.

The boy started to speak again. But the memory began to lose focus. He felt close to remembering what RayRay had said. It was close enough to touch, and it was horrifying. Right around the corner in his mind. But the officer dragged Cy out of the memory.

"Did he say anything else?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"I'm trying. It's not coming to me clear like it was."

Daniels' eyebrow went back up again. "Convenient."

“Excuse me?” Cy felt heat in his temples. His jaw clenched, and his eyes widened.

“You’re just smart enough to know when to be dumb aren’t you, Mr. Daily?”

His dad used to say it with that same raised eyebrow, that sarcastic knowing look of disdain.

‘Cy, you idiot, you’ll never be good for anything but hard labor and ruining somebody’s day,’ his old man would say. Or ‘Big, goofy, shit-eater. Look at that boy, only grinning ‘cause he don’t know how stupid he is.’ Or sometimes, later in the evening, when the whiskey had taken over, the old man would talk nonsense between clouts to the ear or belt lashes to his back. Wham. ‘That hurt, you big dope? Bet it doesn’t hurt like getting your foot ripped off by a piece of flying lead, huh?’ Wham. ‘Bet I don’t hurt like that Zero hurt. Quitcher cryin’ boy. Try having a stump leg. That’ll make you cry.’ Wham ‘Zero. That’s funny. Zero. That’s just what you’re gonna grow up to be. Big Zero. Big pain in my ass.’ His mom would try to intervene, and she would get it too. Same blows, different words.

He never lashed out, never fought back. All he wanted then, all he ever wanted, even now, was just to live in peace. Now, living alone, his parents gone, he felt he was doing that, just living a simple life, day by day, no drama, working, trying to be productive, hoping to amount to more than what his father had told him he would, found what he thought was a good woman, made a home together. Denise. Some good one she turned out to be. Figured she could have a decent life, but couldn’t stand being decent.

When she left he didn't even let that anger get the better of him. A lesser man would have found whatever rascal she was giving time to and put him in the hospital. Or the ground.

But Cy didn't do that. He bought a dog. He bought a dog, and he named it Zero to remind him of how he'd been treated and how he never wanted to be treated again. He raised that dog like his only child, trying to be better than his own father had been. But what he wanted most was peace. And he was at peace, until the trouble with Ray started.

"I ... I remember A.J., in the corner." Cy blurted it out, the memory was so surprising. It had just popped into place.

"What was he doing?"

"Just laying there."

"What do you mean?"

"His eyes were shut, like he was asleep. I can't remember!" Cy's fists were white on the table top. He was sweating again. He strained to penetrate the fog of memory. Then the cloud thinned, enough for him to see just a bit further.

"Oh, God!"

"What?"

"He's dead. He's got a hole in his forehead. A little one. Blood coming out of it on his face. RayRay was saying A.J. got bit, and he was gonna get the rabies too, and RayRay didn't want A.J. to hurt, and had to put him out of his misery. And big Ray said, 'It had to be done, Cy.' What kind of backward-ass idiot goes an' ... doesn't deserve to live ... piece of stupid white trash..."

"What did you do, Mr. Daily?"

“Do?”

“Yes. What happened next? Do you remember what came next?”

“No, it all goes black. I remember feeling like I was gripping that adze so tight I could splinter the handle by squeezing it. Next I was sitting in here.”

“Do you remember being shot at?”

“No.”

“Do you know why you’d be shot at?”

“I don’t know. Did that boy try to shut me up? Big Ray’s the cause. Those boys were afraid of him. He put that little RayRay up to shootin’ his own brother. Who’d come up with a crazy thing like that?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Daily. You were there, not me. How long did it take you to get there after the second shot?”

“A few minutes I guess.”

“Not long for a lot of talking then, huh?”

“No.” Cy still couldn’t penetrate the final fog. He could only remember anger. Anger at the murder of his only friend Zero. Anger at the childlike illogic of killing A.J. He didn’t remember why he was bruised and dirty, or how he got a wound from the grazing shot of a .22 bullet on his side.

Officer Daniels stood and glanced toward the mirror in the far wall.

“Mr. Daily. We’ll try this again later. Maybe some sleep will loosen up those memories.” He approached the door, and Cy stood slowly and turned to follow, but as Daniels left, two uniformed officers entered in his place and shut the door behind them.

Daniels walked down a short hall and entered the observation room next door, where a colleague was waiting.

“Did you see all of that?” Daniels said.

“Yeah. I stood here the whole time. I really don’t think he remembers.”

“Guy offs a grown man and a kid with an adze and the other with a rifle and can’t remember a bit of it. It’s difficult to believe.”

“If he is acting, he missed his calling. Should have been in Hollywood. If he’s telling the truth about A.J., it could make sense. He may have been acting in self defense.”

Daniels followed the train of thought, “RayRay takes a shot to shut him up, misses. Cy rushes him, takes him out of the picture, Dad jumps his back, they fight. Cy comes out on top and sits down in a daze, while Pattie is calling the cops upstairs. If it had been premeditated, he would have killed the whole family right?”

“I don’t know. We may never know.”

They watched through the one-way glass at Cy in handcuffs, his face wrought with confusion.

“I’m going to give it one shot. I think we’re close to something,” said Lofgren, rising. “If not, we’ve at least got to follow procedure. Maybe I can get to him before he thinks about lawyers.”

“Good luck.” Daniels took the seat at the observation window and watched his partner enter the room where Cy and the uniformed officers were preparing to leave.

“Mr. Daily, I’m Officer Lofgren.”

“You’d better be here to explain why the hell I’m being handcuffed.”

“You aren’t in a position to make demands, but you do have rights that...”

“Those freaks killed my dog and A.J.! Why the hell aren’t they in here?”

“Because they are dead Mr. Daily. You are under arrest for the ...”

But Cy didn’t hear any more words. As Lofgren read his Miranda rights, Cy didn’t consider his innocence. He didn’t ponder how to prove it was all an act of self-defense. He was overcome with an old sensation, so full, so overpowering that he lost all sense of where he was and what was being said. He didn’t imagine prison, where he would likely spend the rest of his days. He felt instead the immediate and visceral release he had last experienced when his father died, a sense of relief – a feeling of peace. For just that moment, it covered over all his other cares like a thick, warm blanket.

THE END

### **Story 3**

## **Prodigal Brother**

On any given night of my early childhood, the five of us, Mom, Pop, Jimmy, Melvin and me would huddle around the family radio, to hear the local minister's broadcast or one of the more distant stations, humming along to the latest tune to catch America's fancy. The year everything changed, our ears were bent for news of the war that had just been declared with Japan and then against Germany a few days later. I always listened as carefully as a young girl could. But one night in the early spring of 1942, in the agricultural expanse of North Dakota, our radio did not warble. That night our own family's news was in the making, there in the small family room of the log home my grandfather built with his own hands. I was eight then, too young to be allowed in the room. My mother sat by my bedside, to make sure I didn't creep in to listen to the men.

"It's grown-up talk, Elizabeth," she told me, straightening the bedspread and pulling it up to the frill across the top of my nightgown. "Not for your ears."

"But Jimmy and Mel aren't grownups," I said. My older brothers didn't seem big enough to me at the time to qualify for manhood, even as big as they were. James, Jr., everybody called him Jimmy, was tall and hairy. He had big feet like my father, and he always got to drive the tractor when Pop wasn't on it. Mel was two years younger and shorter than Jimmy, but stronger. He got in trouble more than Jimmy did, but it was usually for laziness, which now I think was more a product of his easy-going style, by which he made all his difficult farming chores seem easy. I thought the strong discipline that fell on him was somehow undeserved. Mel was a full ten years older than I was, but somehow he and I had a bond that wasn't there with Jimmy and me. Mel considered me more, that's all, I guess.

“They are man enough for this talk,” Mom said. Her eyes drifted to the window. Usually, when she would press shirts and handkerchiefs, or cook for hours for the family, she moved and spoke with a lilt that defied whatever was worrying her at the time. That night, no such tone covered her voice, and the sparkle in her eyes was overshadowed by a wrinkled brow.

“Why can’t I hear, Mom? It’s about the war, isn’t it? Why can’t I hear? I get to listen to all the news on the radio.”

“It’s serious talk, hon. More serious even than that radio news. And you can’t be interfering with what’s being said.”

“Alright,” I whispered, with fingers crossed under the bedspread. I closed my eyes as if to go to sleep, waiting for my chance to sneak close enough to hear.

“Good night, dear. Don’t you worry about it a bit. Sweet dreams.” She kissed my forehead and closed the door behind her. Minutes later, I had gotten through the door without its telltale creak, and eased to the edge of the open doorjamb of the family room, where I peeked in. My two older brothers sat side by side, ramrod straight on chairs pulled up to the kitchen table. Pop sat in his usual chair at the end, looking dour as he surveyed the sober faces of his sons.

“...thought long and hard about this, because I know you both are spoiling for a fight,” he said. “We all are. I’m honored to let our country borrow a son of mine for such a noble service. But I can’t lose you both, even for one...”

A swish of a housecoat interrupted my concentration. I darted back toward my room as quietly as I could, straining to hear Pop's words as I moved away from the doorway.

"So I've decided, and I don't want to hear anything of it. There's no way around it, and no arguing with it." I eased my door open, turned and slowly closed it to a crack. Mom's footsteps grew closer. "You have my permission to enlist." He was looking at one of them, I was sure, but he hadn't said his name. If only I could have heard a reply, I'd know who was to go. But I was out of time, so I closed the door and hopped into my bed and returned the covers to their proper place and faked sleep as my mother looked in.

The next day, Melvin found me playing on the hay bales. I was hopping from rolled bale to the next massive roll, on the plot where they stored dozens of them, all lined up, for feeding the livestock. Melvin got up close before I noticed him.

"Aren't you a leapfrog," he said from down behind me on the ground.

"Maybe," I said. I tried to keep from looking at him. I wanted him to know I was angry for being left out of the talk last night, but that was tough with Mel. We were pals. He climbed up and sat on the end of the bale I was standing on. He looked out for a long time at the acreage where he spent so many hours toiling.

"Last year you couldn't get from one to the other without falling between," he said.

"It's better now that I don't need you to pull me out." Mel was my savior when I'd get stuck between the bales, which were twice my height. They were smooth on the sides and so tightly packed end to end that there were some places where I couldn't crawl

out the end of the rows, and I'd just have to call and wait until Mel's grin would appear with his work-rough hand to fish me up out of the dusty prison.

"Why, you may not need me as often, but every once in a while you'll end up down there by accident." He snatched one of my ankles, and I slid down the curved hay into the prickly slot below.

"Meanie!" I yelled, looking up out of the dark space. The sun glared past his smiling face into my eyes.

"What are you going to do now?" He laughed, making no move to pull me to freedom.

"You're going to get me out, that's what," I said. Some straw dust got in my nose, and I sneezed. Mel laughed again.

"Well, you're right, but I'm not going to be around much longer to help you in a pinch, Bess." He reached a hand down and waited for me to grab on. I couldn't move. I sat there crouched in that little space, unable to breathe as if I'd been socked in the stomach. My heart raced, blood flushed my face. I didn't want his hand. I withdrew my face from the gap and crouched down, feeling the moist grass in the dark with my fingers. I couldn't think or do anything but feel the pain of betrayal.

"Go away. I'll get my own self out."

"Don't be that way. I hate to leave, Bess, but I want to go and fight."

"Let somebody else fight," I said, snuffling. "There's other boys."

"But I need to do my part. Pop is letting me go. Jimmy wants to go too, but he has to stay."

“Let Jimmy go. I want you here.”

“Oh, Bess. You’re not listening. A lot of men are going to fight. It’s such a fix they’re in over there. I’m proud Pop picked me.”

“Go, then. Go away, I don’t need you anyway. I’ll get myself out. I hate you.”

Mel’s strong hand then got a grip on my arm and yanked me clear of the fissure where I was crouching. He set me back on the top of the bale.

“You don’t mean it.” He strode to the end of the row and hopped down onto the grass. I turned, sat down on a bale, roughly pulling hay stalks one by one from it. I watched him joining Pop and Jimmy, who were preparing to turn over rows for planting. He fell into the work after replying to something Jimmy had said. I was too far from them to hear, and Mel’s back was to me, but I could tell by Jimmy’s face and Mel’s rigid posture that Jimmy was probably riding him for talking with me instead of helping. Usually, Pop did that, not Jimmy.

I wanted to take back what I said. I loved Mel. I knew he had come to tell me as soon as he could. Jimmy wouldn’t have done that.

As I sat on the bale, I decided I would plead with Pop. The men would soon finish the day’s work. Near dusk, they’d come in to put implements away and wash up for dinner. I knew better than to interrupt them at their work. I walked and jumped among the bales for another while, but that got boring, so I hopped down to wander the home place and await my chance. I walked around the barn to a long watering trough jutting from the side of the barn wall. The trough was separated by a divider into two sections, the closer of which had developed a slow leak. The water level in it was lower, and I looked in and

saw dirt and some grass and other stuff had collected in the bottom. I imagine the livestock didn't notice. I started throwing pebbles into the other section, remembering an old fable about a crow, and wondering if I could cause it to overflow its rim just by adding one pebble at a time. Pop would probably have my hide, but he couldn't see me.

I carried on mindlessly in this way until I heard the big Oliver tractor nearing, so I scraped open the rear door to the barn and entered with the hopes that Pop would return first. I reached the large barn door and saw him coming in off the field, Jimmy and Mel moving along more slowly with the great green tractor. Pop took off his gloves and tossed them onto a work bench.

“To what do I owe this pleasure, Little Sprig? Pop asked.

“I need to talk with you about something real important,” I said. “Just us.”

Pop's face grew dark, and he sat on a stool in front of the work bench and looked at me a moment before speaking.

“What do you need to talk with me about?”

“I want you to send Jimmy instead of Mel,” I said. The noise from the tractor neared the barn yard and chortled to a stop. A period of silence followed that seemed so long, I was afraid dinner would come and go before he answered.

“You mean off to the war, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“I'm not sending either of them. They both want to go.” He said the word “sending” louder than the rest.

“Yes, but you aren't letting Jimmy go, and you're letting Mel.”

“So you want me to stop Mel and let Jimmy go instead?”

“Yes, sir. Jimmy’s older. He should get to go before Mel anyways.”

“Is that the reason you want me to change my decision – that Jimmy has more of a right to go because he’s the oldest?” What had come out of my mouth on a whim began to sound better in his words. I decided to stick with it.

“Yes. That’s fair, you know, since they both want to.”

“There’s nothing fair about it, no matter who’s doing the fighting.” I felt my argument sinking like a paper boat. “This has been the hardest decision I’ve had to make in all my years,” he said, “and I’ve had to make it by weighing more than what seems most fair. At the end, either way, nothing fair about it at all. Somebody loses.”

“Don’t send Mel away, Pop. Please! I love them both, but Mel, Mel’s my friend.”

At this I heard the scratch of a boot in the gravel. I glanced behind me to see Jimmy striding stiffly away from the great barn door toward the house. Pop’s gaze was still fixed on me.

“Well that sounds more like the real reason we’re talking. Eh?”

“Yes, sir. Please please please change your mind.”

“I can’t do that, young lady. I won’t. There’s more to it than you understand, and it’s not for you to decide. I’ve told those two what’s to be, and they are beginning to deal with that decision in their own way. It’s not easy for either of them, and it’s not easy for you or me or your mother. I won’t change my mind when the wind blows, and for both their sakes I won’t change this decision on the whims of a little girl that doesn’t know yet where these decisions lead. I’m sorry, Bess, but it’s final.” He stood up from his stool and

brushed a few smudges of dirt from the leg of his pants. Blood rushed to my head. I wasn't so young I didn't know stuff. Mostly the sense that Mel was slipping away from me swelled deep in the bottom of my throat, bitter and too large to swallow.

"Yes, sir." I didn't want him to see me cry, so I hurried away, head down, elbows locked at my sides, to find a place to be alone before mother called us to dinner. I intended to take matters into my own hands, but preventing Mel from leaving was not a problem easily solved. It would be a few days before the solution would form in my eager mind.

Mel came to me across the garden mid-morning that day, grinning at me with the promise of adventure that only Mel and I shared. He, Pop and Jimmy had been breaking up a new patch of ground for some new vegetable rows for mother. I noticed Jimmy watching Mel's departure from their work. Pop was still bent over the task, but Jimmy stood with his hands on the upturned handle of an adze. His eyes drifted to me, and I saw in his face the resentment that had taken root there. I didn't know if it was a feeling he held for Mel or for me – whether for trying to send him away or for preferring Mel over him as a brother. A sharp gesture from Pop got him back to work and the look melted into the stony blank stare of toil, but I thought I could still see it in his vicious sweeping strokes at the hard earth. Mel approached and took my attention back.

"Pop said I could take you gopher hunting with me. Want to go?"

"Really? I'm big enough now?" I couldn't contain my glee. This was a first.

"I guess you are. You can't shoot yet, but you can be my scout."

The rest of that day, we traipsed across the pastures reserved for grazing, and anytime I sighted one of the brown rodents, whose burrows were known for breaking the legs of cows that stepped in the wrong places, my deadeye brother would raise his .22 and blow the pest to smithereens. He never missed. The best part of my charge as scout was to then inspect the remains to insure that it was a clean kill. This was the phrase he taught me, but I noticed that “clean” was never the case. The insides of these creatures were always scattered in a gory display. It fascinated me and frightened me in the same breath. He explained that “clean kill” was just what you call it. It didn’t really have to be clean.

“Do you shoot people when you fight in a war, Mel?”

“Yeah, sometimes I guess you have to, or they’ll shoot you.”

“What if you run out of bullets?” We had emptied nearly a box of cartridges by the end of our day of hunting.

“Well, you can’t really fight if you don’t have any bullets, huh Bess.”

“No, I guess not,” I said, and as I said it, the solution to my problem fell into my mind. I knew how to keep Mel with me, with a certainty that can only reside in the eight-year-old mind. I reached for Mel’s hand, and we walked this way all the way back to the house.

“That sure is a big smile you have there. I haven’t seen it in a while,” Mel said as we walked along. “You like scouting for me I guess, do ya?”

“Sure do.” My stomach fluttered, partly with hunger for the dinner that awaited us and partly for the excitement of my newly formed plan.

That night after bedtime, I crept from my room and hurriedly collected all the boxes of cartridges Mel kept for his guns. He had a .22 for gophers and jackrabbits and a shotgun for fowl and a bigger rifle for the occasional deer hunt. The ammunition for these were all stored in the barn, and when I was satisfied that I had all the boxes, six in all, I went to the corner of the near field behind the barn, a few feet from newly-covered corn row furrows, dug a hole in the soft, rich earth and gave the boxes a solemn burial.

As I came around the barn, returning to the house, I noticed Jimmy, sitting on a large field stone under the shadowed eave of the cabin. We looked at each other as I passed, but as was our new custom, neither of us said a word. I stole to my bed and fell asleep quickly and soundly.

The rest of that planting time, there was a lot of work to be done. Mom had me busy with household chores, and the men were up before dawn and worked until dusk. I didn't see a lot of them, except at dinner, where few words fell between the clink of forks on the plates. I barely had time to say a few words to anyone before I was sent off to get ready for bed.

Then one night the worry and fear must have just been too much to hold in. We were eating dinner as usual, just after sundown. I was sitting at my place, looking at Mel, wondering if he knew I had hidden his bullets. He had a heaviness about him that I mistook for his desire to go to war being thwarted by the loss of his ammunition. I felt a tiny stab of guilt, but my relief that he couldn't go outweighed any misgivings. He still had not accused me, so I felt the risk of discovery had withered. He kept his head low and pushed the food around on his plate. Jimmy was restless as well. Mom broke the silence.

“You boys had a tough one today.”

“Yeah,” Mel said, “Pop wanted to make sure we got done with the back lot before sundown.”

“It was a heap of work, that’s true,” Jimmy said without looking up from his food. “We could have used your help, Mel.” Pop put his fork down and peered at Jimmy silently.

“What exactly are you getting at?” Mel answered.

“Well it seems clear to me. You get the call to arms and can’t keep your mind on the task, is what I’m getting at.”

“That’s not true, and you know it.”

“Boys.” Mom tried to interject, but the two had locked eyes, and no one was going to stop what had started.

“True as I’m sitting here. I’m not sure it would have made much difference if you’d just stayed in bed all day.”

“Jimmy, don’t bite off more than you can chew. I’m not in a state you want to be starting something with me.”

“I’m not starting anything. Just stating a fact. You best be getting your act together before you run off into that uniform.”

Mel put his napkin on his unfinished food. Jimmy kept on. “You keep up that lazy, daydreaming attitude, and you’ll be getting folks shot, including yourself. Fighting’s harder work than you’ve got in you.”

“You’re about to see how much fight I’ve got,” Mel said. His hands were pressed flat on the table top.

“Who knows, maybe Hitler, himself, will give you a medal for aiding the war effort.” At this Mel stood, and more quickly than seemed possible, he had a handful of Jimmy’s shirt across the table. He pulled as Jimmy stood, while Jimmy reached for Mel’s collar for his own grip. Their two chairs teetered and fell loudly on the plank floor, but the shuffling clatter stopped with a word from Pop.

“Boys,” he took a second to eye each one, their chests heaving with adrenalin-fueled rage. “Not a fist will fall in this house. If you must settle it, take it outside.”

Now, I wish it had ended there, that my brothers had seen the uselessness of it all, and made amends, standing across the table from one another. But at the time, at that age, I didn’t know any better, didn’t know what would come of it. I wanted them to fight. It seemed right to me then. I wanted Mel to have his answer to Jimmy’s insults. I smiled inside when the two stamped quickly out the door, mother with thin white lips taking the two unfinished plates off the table and quickly scraping pork chops and potatoes into a pan for the dog. Even though she tried to hustle me off to my room, I lingered, listening to the fall of fists on my brothers’ cheeks, the angry grunts and curses of the scuffle. And I felt a tingle of pride, when I saw the bruises on Jimmy’s face the next morning, knowing Mel had gotten the upper hand. It seemed like justice to me then.

There wasn’t any work done that next day. Jimmy busied himself alone in the barn, and Mom and Pop bent silently in the garden, as all the heavy work had been finished. Mel stayed inside for most of the morning, which was strange for him, while I

played and wandered around the yard, and hopped along the bales. Around midday, Mel approached from the house with a long loop of string in his hand. A single red welt stood on his left cheekbone, but his eager grin stole away my visions of his fight with Jimmy.

“Want to catch a gopher?” he asked.

“Yeah!” I jumped from the bales and skipped off behind him into the field.

We found a fresh gopher hole, and he looped a slipknot down around the inside rim of the opening. He trailed the string carefully along the ground, and at the other end we sat in the grass and dirt and waited silently for the gopher to emerge. We had done this many times; long before I was deemed old enough to help hunt them, I was allowed to help snare them. After a while, a curious gopher would poke its head up to look around, and snatch, we’d yank the string and have a gopher on a leash.

I leaned against Mel’s strong shoulder and thought about how I’d like to be tough like him, girl or not. That didn’t matter. Girls could be tough, I knew. I looked at his boots, and how much bigger they were than mine. He had on clean blue jeans today and a shirt better than ones he usually worked in.

“Why are you dressed up, Mel?” I whispered.

“Shhhhh. We don’t want to scare him from coming up.”

I looked at Mel’s face, which held his usual easy smile, but it seemed hollow. His brow carried a weight that didn’t match his face. And though he watched the hole intently, his eyes looked right through the ground to somewhere else. Just then the engine of the old Packard roiled to life in the barn. I stood up and turned toward the house. Mom walked out into the dirt and gravel drive, carrying a suitcase. The Packard swung slowly

out of the barn toward the house with Pop behind the wheel. I turned back to Mel, and he was standing, too, looking at me, an apology stuck in his mouth, the gopher string laying forgotten between his feet.

“Pop’s taking me to the train today in Fargo.”

“No,” I said. “You can’t go.” I was thunderstruck.

“I’ve got to. The Army’s waiting for me.”

I grabbed around his thighs with both arms and buried my face in his stomach, tears already flowing.

“You’ve got to let me leave, Bess.”

“You’re going to fight now, aren’t you?”

“It’s fighting that needs doing.”

“You’ll come back soon then, won’t you? You can fight better than anybody.”

“Yeah, I will, you can count on it.” He pried my arms loose, and squatted to give me a kiss on the cheek. I kissed his cheek back, and hugged him tightly. Then I let him go.

“Count on it,” he said, and he turned and walked to the car, kissed Mom, stepped into the passenger side and rolled away. Jimmy never emerged from the barn.

That Sunday found me sitting by the radio. Mom said it would be a while before news of Mel’s fighting would reach us. “We need us some good news,” she said and tuned in to the minister’s broadcast and settled down in her favorite chair and folded her hands in her lap. With all the work done all the time around the farm, Sunday was one day she set the work down and rested “as the good Lord commanded.”

That day the minister talked about the story of the prodigal son. I was too young to fully understand a grown-up sermon, but two things the minister said stuck in my young mind. One was how, when the son came back, the father dropped his work in the field and hiked up his robe or whatever they wore back in the Bible and ran flat out to meet him. He said it was an undignified thing, the way he tore off through the field, but he didn't care, he was so happy to have his son back.

The other thing I remember is that the brother was jealous of all the celebration they threw for the lost son. He had stayed home and worked and done everything he was supposed to, and here was this other that didn't. But when the other came back, the good son felt forgotten. Now, I can see where he was coming from, feeling like they had skipped over him for the one that wasted all his money and honor and then came skulking back. But during those worrisome days, I guess the idea of a happy homecoming was too bright in my mind to even imagine any other thing. And the brother's jealousy made me mad.

It was almost three years before my brother got back. I wish I could say he was the same old Mel when he returned, but that would be a lie. Wish I could tell you in truth how Pop caught sight of Mel, walking down the road toward the house, and how he leaped off the tractor, hiked up his overalls and ran, hat flying, across the field and embraced my weary soldier-brother, home from the good fight, how we slaughtered a young calf and celebrated for a week. But it wasn't to be.

On a blazing day in July of 1945 a pickup truck pulled slowly into the dooryard, and a man stepped out and unfastened a wheelchair and pulled it from the bed. I was watching from the door of the barn. He rolled the chair around to the passenger side and opened the door. My brother stepped one shiny army boot out onto the gravel and eased himself into the chair. The man heaved an army issue rucksack out of the bed, slid it over one shoulder and rolled Mel to the front of the house, where my mother appeared. I saw her press her hands to her cheeks and then bend to hug Mel tightly as I sprinted with all the speed I had to greet my brother. By the time I got there, the man had finished a brief conversation with Mom, and was climbing in his truck to leave.

I rounded the bulky chair, set to leap onto Mel's lap and give him the hug I had awaited for three years, but what I saw was a different Mel. One of his legs ended above the knee. His pant leg was tucked up neatly and fastened to the fabric against his upper thigh. His frame was thinner, as though he had been issued a dress uniform a size too big. And his eyes and cheeks were sunken. He smiled, sure, but Mel's grin was gone. Instead he wore the thin smile of a man who had gone too far away from happiness to ever come all the way back.

I hugged him gently, worried somehow I might hurt his leg, or squeeze some last bit of life out of him that the army had left us. We'd soon know bits and pieces of Mel's fight, and how some nameless crossroads skirmish in the European countryside had claimed his right leg, and how the whole war, all the explosions and fear and dying had claimed the boy we had given three years before.

Pop and Jimmy were far from the house, busy working in the back acres and didn't even know Mel had returned. Mom went over to the bell she rang when supper was almost ready. I looked at Mel as the bell began to ring, and tried my best to put a smile on to match his. Under the urgent clanging, I leaned carefully to Mel's ear and whispered, "Welcome home."

Within a week, we had begun to get used to the idea of Mel being back. He was mostly sullen and sometimes edgy, seldom spoke and was often given to long hours of listlessness, staring into space. Occasionally I would help him move from place to place. Severe damage to his inner ears had made balancing on his only leg difficult. So I would prop up his skeletal frame as we shuffled along to some other room or onto the porch for some air. When he left for the war I would have been too little to do this, but by the time he returned, I had grown dramatically, and I was pleased to offer this new strength to help my brother. But he never mentioned these changes. Never said much of anything except a soft "Thank you."

At times, I would sit in a room with him, and try to think of words to say to him, some way to open the door to that friendship we shared before. But I didn't know where to begin. I knew he had seen things he'd never be able to tell me about. I wasn't even sure I wanted to hear about them, and I certainly didn't want to pain him by taking him back there. But in the years he had been gone, I had forgotten the little phrases and jokes and stories we'd shared. I had worked and played and read and gone to school, missing him all the while, but somehow feeling that our connection would be like riding a bike. Once he got back, we would know how to pick up, and we could resume. But as I sat in

the silence, searching for some little joke we used to like, the fear built in me that it wouldn't turn out that way; all the connective tissue between us had been rudely cut by trauma and pain.

More than that, I had begun to feel a seething guilt for hiding those bullets from him. At first I thought I had allowed him to be sent to war without the means to fight. Eventually I realized this was silly. He didn't need shotgun shells to fight Germans. The Army equipped him. He had never even mentioned the disappearance. But there was no relief in my understanding. Somehow the residual guilt remained in my mind as a simple betrayal of my brother in the weeks before he left. I had been untrue to him, even if it was a silly plan, even if it was an effort to protect him. I knew it was selfish, and this seed of shame grew to fullness in my mind.

At dinner one night eight days after he returned, I tried to clear the shame away so I could start fresh with my brother. Mel sat in his new spot at the table where I used to sit, at the corner near my mother. She had said he could sit there in case he needed her help, and Pop had just nodded. Mel hadn't reacted at all, but I think he probably hated it. Jimmy remained close on Pop's right side, I across from him now. That night he and Pop leaned toward each other, talking about work or business of some kind. They had already devoured their food, having worked a hot, full day outside. Mel stared at his plate, his food mostly untouched.

"Mel, are you done? I can take your plate if you want," Mom said.

Mel nodded, and after his plate was gone he put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

“I’m done too, Mom,” I said quickly and ran out to the field beyond the barn. I returned a few minutes later and dumped an armload of filthy cartridge boxes on the table in front of Mel. I stood, panting, by the table, relieved I had undone this one deed I had carried for so long, waiting for Mel to wake up and come back to me.

His head came up slowly and his eyes fixed on the boxes. Gradually his eyes widened, until too much of the whites showed. Those eyes held horrors in them.

“Bullets?” Mel said.

“I’m sorry, Mel. Back then, I thought you couldn’t go if you didn’t...” In one groping lunge, Mel swept the boxes from the table. Bullets and lumps of dark earth scattered and mingled on the hard wooden slats.

His wide eyes drilled into mine and spittle shot from his lips as he yelled, “If I never see another bullet in my life it will be too soon!!” I sprinted out into the darkening evening, crying loudly, and ran till I couldn’t breathe.

One day, later in the year after Mel came back, Jimmy came off the fields early and found me playing in the yard. He usually just went about his business, but this day he walked right up and spoke to me.

“Elizabeth,” he said, “you want to help me catch some gophers?”

“No.” I hated being called that.

“Why not? I know you like to.”

“Not anymore. Besides, you can’t do it right.”

“Sure I can. Anybody can catch a gopher.”

“Not like Mel can.”

“Oh, so Mel can catch a gopher better than anybody else, is that it?”

“Better than you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Mel can do everything better than you, Jimmy. He worked the farm better than you, and the only reason Pop chose him to go is that Pop knew he could fight better than you.”

We stood silently looking at each other for a minute there in the dirt. My feet were squared off in my dirty little boots, my fists clenched, pressed against the legs of my overalls. I wanted him to hit me. I wanted us to fight. Jimmy’s mouth opened a tiny bit, and his shoulders slid down slowly. After a few more moments, I turned and ran to the bales and climbed on top. I leaped one to the other until I found a gap in the middle of the rows that I knew had no way out. I slid quickly down into the crevasse, crouched down into the cool, musty darkness, and waited in vain for Mel’s grin to appear and fill the sliver of blue sky.

I’m twenty-eight now, and I’m sitting here on those same bales. They always put them in the same place. I am a high school teacher, living on my own in Fargo. But sometimes I come back to the old home place to visit.

Jimmy took over the operation of the farm ten years ago, after Mel’s death. Mom is holding steady, but Pop still hasn’t really recovered from it. The V.A. doctor had given Mel a bottle of sleeping pills, for those nights that memories of war kept him awake. One

night, after I had moved away for college, I guess Mel finally decided he wanted to rest forever. Mom found him in his bed, his mind finally at peace. Dad's indomitable spirit caved in when this happened. His firm dedication to the work and business of the farm buckled under the feeling that he had chosen this fate for Mel. Jimmy took it hard in his own way, but his head stayed level, and eventually Pop felt he should take charge of things. He is married now and raising his own children in a home he built here on the property.

Back then, when Mel was at war, I thought of Jimmy's jealousy and how it must be like the prodigal's brother, angry that his commitment to the home and family wasn't appreciated. After hearing a sermon on the radio, I applied that Bible story to our lives and expected it all to turn out the same. But lately I realize that Jimmy's jealousy was short lived. He had wanted to go, but the state of Mel upon his return dispelled any trace of jealousy Jimmy had. The loss we felt while he was gone was even intensified with his return. The old smiling Mel wasn't back; it was some changed man the Army returned to us. And his suicide confirmed the feeling that he had never really come back at all. Now I think we simply lived out a different story, one where the lost son never comes home.

It's hard to think about, but I try to just remember my favorite things about Mel. That helps. Sitting on these hay bales helps, too. It's warm here, sitting on a summer evening, looking across the rolling fields, the sky as big and blue as a dream.

Jimmy named his oldest son for Melvin. He's eight years old now and running all over the hay bales behind me. I get up and hop along behind him, leaping from one curved top to the next. I hear the old dinner bell ringing, and I turn to see Mom working

her arm in a slow circle, making sure Jimmy can hear from wherever he's working. She cooks a big dinner for everybody when I come to visit. I hear an "Oof" as my nephew thuds into the side of a hay bale, and when I turn to see, he has already disappeared. This game is one of his favorites. I run across the bales, stopping at each gap between to see where he is hiding. Finally, as I peer into the darkness of one narrow chasm, I hear a giggle, and my nephew's grinning face appears dimly in the shadow. I straddle the gap, reach down and grasp his little hand.

"Supper time, Mel. After we eat, you want to try to catch a gopher?" I say.

"Yeah!"

THE END

## **Story 4**

### **The One**

I'm in my Mercedes, getting ready to enter the veterinarian's office for an unannounced visit. I'm using the visor mirror to touch up my makeup, because you never know who you might meet. I freshen my lipstick and check for tooth smudges. I turn my head to both sides to make sure each blonde strand is in its proper place. My eyebrows are magnificent.

My name is Bristol Benson, and I'm a widow. But I've still got it. My writing tutor, Remy, says I don't look a day over forty, which is ten years off the mark, give or take a year. He's only twenty eight, so what does he know, right? You may not think so, but he actually does know a thing or two for a kid. Like that I can turn a phrase, and I'm good at observance, and I'm spunky. He's right about all of that.

He's due for our appointment at my house in just over an hour, so it's really by sheer luck that I'll get in and out of the vet and get home on time. I'm not sure if Tina's knees are bothering her again or if it's something else, but she's all I've got right now, and mama's baby comes first. My appearance addressed, I collect my purse, gather Tina from the back seat and enter the office.

At this instant, I focus on the stretching sensation of my ocular muscles as I roll my eyes past their exquisitely mascaraed lashes into my head. I do that sometimes. I step outside myself, just to take stock of my body and my mind. I'm okay – exasperated but okay. I click my cute high heels across the tile of the veterinarian's office, past the crowd in the waiting room, and sign my name on the sheet. Tina and I look stunning as usual.

Most of the others in the waiting room don't look up. Better not to stare, which is good manners. They have that going for them. I scan for a seat, past a varied catalog of

the human condition, amidst the noise of their animal companions. A little girl in the corner needs more love from mom. Poor thing is dressed in overalls. I'm sorry, Oshkosh B'Gosh or not, they don't come cute enough to put your little girl in. No amount of hair bows can make me forget it either. Her beagle looks nice, though.

Next to mediocre-figure soccer mom is a small, ugly Italian-looking man with expensive clothes and the saddest dachshund I've ever seen. Next to him is a tiny woman, just north of fifty, wishing she were not his wife but glad for the rocks she obviously wants us to see, all over her ears, fingers, and dangling listlessly between her leathery breasts. Honey, use some of Don Corleone's green to take care of yourself. Nothing to it. Those are the two most important jewels you have. Invest in them. It's what I did.

Two children, a clean but furry little boy in a basketball outfit and a dirty female urchin in a pink corduroy skirt and lacey white cotton blouse, sit in the next three seats with one empty between. She is holding a sleepy-looking Siamese cat on her lap. I guess that the girl-child is too greasy and gaunt to belong to the couple. I scan past, knowing I could hold Tina in my lap and sit in the gap between the two kids, but I think the little girl probably smells. This thought curls my lip a bit. Next to the girl is an end table covered with recent editions of *Cat Fancy* and *Dog Fancy* and *Bird Talk*. A fake plant hovers over the corner of the table. Beside the plastic peace-lily fronds, coated with a light collection of dust is a burly man, maybe close to my age, with clean Carhartts work pants and a plaid flannel. He wears two impressively clean work boots between which sits a beautiful boxer puppy. The boxer strains playfully at his leash, but Carhartts man has no trouble keeping him put with a firm grip and gentle, cajoling murmurs. I briefly

consider his absence of a wedding ring and what it would be like to hear these murmurs whispered into *my* ear. But I don't go for guys in Carhartts.

Next to him is a man who would be forgettable without his white sideburns. Having no animal with him, I assume he is waiting for the vet to finish with his. He looks familiar, and I fear he may be one of my late husband's old golfing acquaintances. His eyes meet mine, and I see pleasantries, but nothing implying he's been privy to any of Harold's famous green-side banter about his trophy wife. He's just admiring the view.

Harold died six months ago, in September. He was up at the Tennessee Volunteers football game, standing in line to use the restroom, and his heart just stopped. He called it his "ticktock," after the pacemaker they put in, and he said it bumped along as regular as a metronome. "Ticktock, solid as a rock," then he'd bump his sternum once with each fist like King Kong. I suppose once that muscle squeezes umpteen thousand times, it just gets tired, pacemaker or not. Died right there in Neyland Stadium, which was probably as fitting a place as could be. I dare say if he could have chosen a place to kick the bucket, Neyland would have been in his top five. He loved his Vols. I wouldn't be caught dead there myself, no pun intended. Orange makes me look like I'm about to toss my cookies.

Anyway, five months was enough time to get some perspective, and to get all the estate issues worked out. His daughter is nearly my age and wasn't the easiest gal to work with. I can't say she was too happy the way things ended up, either. Harold's Nissan dealerships went to her, but everything else – his investment portfolio, savings, CDs, life

insurance, and whatnot – went to me. So she got the fishing pole, and I got a whole hell of a lot of fish.

Tina looks at me. I can see in her eyes she and I agree on where to sit. Friendly-old-man versus stinky-pink-corduroy-girl is an easy choice. I sit down with my purse in the next seat setting Tina on my lap, so she can continue to observe him.

“Yorkie?” he says to me.

“Tina.” I correct with one eyebrow raised because it feels more right to have one up. Tina follows the conversation like a tennis match. She has her paws placed together the way I like her to do, so her toenail polish (today it is lavender) is prominently displayed.

“Ahhhh.” He smiles undaunted. “I have a Jack Russell.”

“Well I should have guessed! You look like a Jack Russell man, distinguished.”

“Ma’am I wish you wouldn’t use a word like ‘distinguished.’ That usually comes before ‘old gent.’” Eyes just twinkling right along.

“Well, I promise not to say ‘distinguished,’” I say, “if you promise not to call me ‘ma’am.’ My name is Bristol Benson.” And here is where these long lashes have a mind of their own. They come down low, and I look past them and can’t quite help it if they give off a certain impression to some fine gentlemen. I smile and receive his hand softly, and though my eyelids have that sleepy look you’d probably call a “gaze,” my eagle vision hasn’t missed the Rolex shining up at me. I’m observant, that’s all. Tina tenses on my lap at the handshake. She generates a low murmur like a tiny Weedeater that usually comes with a little crinkle of her lips, right before she starts to outright snarl at people.

She still hasn't gotten used to Remy. He's helping me with my memoir. It's the going thing. And after two rich, dead husbands – yeah there was another one – and all the drama that goes with that, I've got some juicy stories to tell.

Remy says I've got a great vocabulary. I know it. I always have. Sometimes I'll go right to the dictionary after talking with somebody or reading something and look up a word, just so I know how to use it later. That's how I keep adding to my available lexicon – see there's one!

So I was sitting on the sofa one day and realized it was time to write my memoir, and I didn't have a clue how to begin or how to start or what, and the more I thought about how stuck I was, the more badly I wanted to get it written. It's like I'm a bottle of champagne with all that carbonation pressurized inside, and it's just dying to come out. I bought a little ad, looking for a writing tutor who could make house calls. I figured with all them young profs over at the university not making all that much money, probably, somebody's got to be open to making a little more on the side.

Sure enough, that little ad barely hit the pages of the Thrifty Nickel before my phone started ringing off the hook. My attorney culled down the group based on educational credentials and a few additional specifications, (i.e. male gender, taller than 5'11", non-smoker) and sent me Remy. Couldn't ask for a better tutor. He's got me writing my weekly observances, and I'm just great at that. I'm a good observer. I go out and get my pedicure, or go to the shopping mall, and when I get back, I just write and write, because these eagle eyes see it all. Like I can see this man sitting next to me has caught what I like to call the Bristol bug.

“Well that name’s marvelous. Bristol,” he savors the sound. “Is that where you’re from?”

“No, my daddy was a race car driver, not one you’ve ever heard of. But he had a top-five finish at Bristol one year, and that, he said, was the best drive of his life. He and Mom had me later that year, and he told her, boy or girl, the name was going to be Bristol. So that’s me.”

This came out over-rehearsed, almost a spillage, so inside I tell myself it is time to stop talking and be a little more cold. Besides, I’m just acting out of old habit now, aren’t I? Flirting with an older guy with money. I have all I’ve ever wanted now, except a memoir. Important folks write memoirs, folks that have something to say. Well I’ve got something to say. You can look at my blond hair all you want, but I can observe like an eagle, and I got a huge vocabulary, and Remy says I have clever syntax.

“Well I like it,” the old man keeps on. “It reminds me of pistol.”

“Is that so?” I toy with Tina’s hair, giving off an air of bored distraction. A vet assistant opens the door from beside the window, holding a clipboard and a file folder.

“Cy Daily?” Burly Carhartts man gets up and walks past her through the door nodding, his puppy weaving behind him, smelling and looking at everything he can get close to on the way.

The old man is still looking at me.

“Are you a pistol, Bristol?” the smile broadens to a toothy grin. I don’t think those teeth are actual.

“No,” I say with as much disinterest as I can squeeze into such a little word. A shadow passes through the man’s eyes. He is measuring my words for chemistry, and I’m not giving him enough to measure. There it is, the slight loosening of the shoulders, and he straightens back slightly into his own space. He gets the picture. Suddenly, though, I feel sorry, as if a taxi has driven by while I watched from the curb.

“Well, Bristol, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Henry. Henry Delso.” His grin has withered back to a mere hint of pleasantry. Tina stops groaning. Henry has started looking at his shoes.

“Good to meet you Mr. Delso,” I say. I’ve gone too far. It’s lost.

A wave of melancholera hits me right in the throat, and I’m not sure if it’s real pain like I’ve choked on my gum or if it’s just this sadness all of a sudden. Something lost. Like what if he was The One? Not the big fish, the next score ... but The One. My mom used to talk about it to me when I was little, after my dad died. He was a lot older than her, but did she ever love him!

She said he was The One, and when I asked her what that meant, she said it meant she could tell him everything in her head like she was talking to herself, and it wasn’t weird or anything. She didn’t have any secrets from him, ‘cause they were soul mates and were meant for each other and knew they’d only have each other forever, and so there was no use putting up walls. And she was so lonely without him, but I knew she’d take a year of that crushing, empty loneliness for just a day with him because what they had was right. He didn’t always act like it, and they fought sometimes, and he’d always apologize and try to make it better, and he always did. They were each other’s One.

I always figured they were just lucky. But every once in a while I think about it, and like now with this Henry, I look at this man and I wonder what it would be like to say all of what I've got to say. Would he listen, or would he just pat me on the head and ask for a glass of tea and think about who the Vols are playing that Saturday?

I'm sitting, looking at my shoes now, too. I'm trying to think of what I might say to bring it back around. It's all too hard. I'm the one that gets pursued. But I figure it's got to be done. I'll just open my mouth and see what comes out. I put my hands on Tina and squeeze her for assurance, probably a bit too hard, and I take a big, deep breath, and I am about to say something when...

"You know your husband told me once at the driving range he was happy as a clam."

So he *was* one of Harold's golfing buddies. Henry, Hank, Delso, Delso, the name still isn't ringing any bells. I'm smiling with just my mouth. "He said it was a fine arrangement. He needed a nurse, and you needed a purse." My mouth slips open slightly. "I'm glad to have gotten the chance to meet Nurse Bristol."

"Delso." The name is spoken loudly from the doorway. Henry rises, nods slightly toward me with his eyes fixed firmly on the attendant waiting at the door.

"I'm Delso," he says.

I'd heard it before when Harold didn't think I was within earshot. It was one of his favorite lines. You know how old people get a witty saying on the brain, and they keep trying it out on different people for a cheap laugh. I guess I didn't take it hard then because I was too busy getting what I was after, too bent on being the cheery, bright light

for Harold's gloomy day, and figured there was some truth in it after all, and sometimes facing facts is what works best. It never penetrated as deep as it does now, coming from Henry Delso.

I watch Henry follow the white-frosted vet assistant into the bowels of the animal hospital, and with each step away, the thought hammers home that around town people I don't know are thinking they know me and what I'm about. They think I'm just out to be some old man's nurse. Getting paid to spend my life, my youth, my beauty on a rich old sugar daddy, getting paid after the work's done. Well I've got more than that. I'm more important than that. I've got something to say.

After what feels like an eternity, I'm ushered back and the vet looks Tina over. I explain to her that she was complaining all morning about something. She woke me up with this Godawful yowling moan, and she wouldn't eat her Iams. Just kept whining and looking at me till I couldn't stand it anymore. I didn't want her feeling bad. Besides, yowling is no way for a lady to behave. The only sounds I expect from her are dainty yips and the clicking patter of her paws on the marble. The vet is unable to find any problems, says that Tina seems like a healthy little dog and sends me on my way. I pay at the window and hustle to the door.

"Come on Tina. Remy might be waiting." I click my heels right on out, and slide from the cold February day into the slick leather seats of my little coup, warm from the low winter sun. The Benz purrs to life, and I head on back home. I've got plenty of material for my writing assignment. Lots of observances this week. Remy is supposed to be over any minute, and I'm fifteen minutes away.

As I merge onto I75, I think about my father in his racing days, flying, nudging cars and pushing the envelope, driving mile after mile, round and round for a hot, stressful eternity, cooped up in a steel roll cage, wrapped in a fire-proof jump-suit, until the checkered flag waves over his windshield, and he pulls in and unstraps and unsnaps and runs to my mom in the pit and picks her up and swirls her around and kisses her all over. I can see her grinning like gold, looking down on him. He's all sweaty and gross, and she's not caring at all because he's The One, and she's said all she's got to say, and even if he's not in the winner's circle, he's got the best prize of all waiting there in the pit for him; not a trophy, but a prize. And they go home and talk through the night, him about the thrill of the race and her about her wants and dreams and loves and hates and fears.

I feel wetness on my cheeks and realize I'm crying like a baby in my little convertible, and I'm glad it's winter and the top's up, so nobody can see Nurse Bristol, shooting tears all over the steering wheel. I fish in the console for a Kleenex and try to make myself presentable for Remy, who might be waiting for me when I get there, which is good, because I've got to get this out, and by God if there's not going to be a One, at least I can write like I'm going to tell the world, and Remy can read it and fix my errors and not judge me, and he'll be some literary version of The One.

Last week's appointment was less than perfect. I hadn't written much. You can only describe lonely in so many ways. Remy had been sitting at my computer, reading my weekly notes and making comments and edits, but standing behind him watching his work, my thoughts kept drifting to his perfect ears and jaw and the way his shoulders

curved down slightly and then up to join his smooth neck. I thought about what it would be like to kiss that neck, a young place, something far from the wattled flesh that hung in papery curtains from Harold's chin. I thought about heat and ecstasy and vigor. I couldn't stop my hand when it reached out and settled gently on his shoulder. I had never touched him before except to shake hands. We have a professional relationship.

He stood abruptly. "Well, heh, that's pretty good for this week. I think you'll see what I've done there, and it'll give you some things to work on."

"Okay. Thank you," I said. I saw a glimmer of panic in his eyes before they strayed to gather his coat. "'Till next week?"

"Right. Yes. Next week. See you then." He exited not so much hurriedly, but so efficiently that the point was made. I sat in front of the television the rest of the day, holding Tina close.

Since then I've wondered if it really was rejection or just his fear of the moment, the feeling you've been forced to the edge of the cliff and that decision you thought might be out there is suddenly in your face. Would his wife let him come tutor some wealthy widow if things were just peachy at home? Remy is kind and warm and helpful. He says nice things to me, not just about my writing, but about things I'm wearing or about my interior decorations. He likes my style. He laughs at my jokes. I know he thinks about me. He must. I was just too hasty. He was just too scared. I can save this, I just have to settle back into the rhythm we had and take my time.

I roll slowly up the long, curved driveway on my large tract in Harrison, just outside Chattanooga. The house is a big colonial with a wide porch to a looming front

door. I notice Remy's car isn't in its usual spot, and it makes the house look emptier than I already know it is – just a big white, colonial emptiness, hollow and echoing.

On the porch, I find a note. It reads:

“Dear Bristol, I'm sorry you weren't here for me to tell you this in person, but maybe it's better this way. As I told you before, I'm appreciative of the opportunity to work for you in the capacity of tutor, and have been lucky to work for such a nice employer. It seems to me that you have reached a point where I have taught you all I am able. To continue would be to simply keep editing ongoing reminiscences of your week, taking your money but providing nothing more than a second set of eyes to edit along behind you. I think you can get this kind of help for less than you are paying me, and I don't want extra money badly enough to take it from someone needlessly. Not only for that, but because of another feeling I have recently arrived at, it seems I'm being dishonest if I continue in your employ. It would likewise be dishonest not to share this feeling.”

My heart speeds slightly, and my breath comes quicker as I turn the small handwritten page, written in Remy's graceful hand.

“Simply put, I don't think you have a publishable memoir here, Bristol. I have yet to hear something I think would be marketable to the public. You keep telling me about this thing, something you 'have to say,' and yet you've never said it to me, verbally or in the segments you've been writing. I've come to feel you don't have anything to say, really, that anyone hasn't heard before. Of course, that is just one man's opinion, but this man feels that to continue taking your money and ignoring this conclusion would be

thievery. Please don't hate me for it. If you wind up with a bestseller one day, I will stand corrected. As it is, my continuance there is giving you a false hope of an outcome that I don't foresee as possible. For this reason, I must resign. Please accept my apologies, and farewell.

Sincerely,

Remington Poole"

The page crinkles in my white grasp. Tina whines up at me, wondering why I'm holding her so tightly. My shiny heels click across the glossy marble, through the entrance hall, into my bathroom where I pour a vial of bubble bath soap into the tub and turn the taps on full. I return to the side of my tall four-poster bed, where the broad expanse of its comforter catches articles of the day's clothing one by one. The shiny shoes lie silently on the carpet as I pad back in and enter the froth that awaits me in the tub. I splash my face, then just sit in the bath, Tina nestled in a towel on the floor nearby, and watch the bubbles burst one by one. The weightlessness of the deep water soothes me, and I drift into sleep.

After a while, I startle awake. I must have kicked the plug on the drain, because I'm lying in the clammy emptiness of the huge, round tub. It's a low feeling, waking up naked, damp and alone in a bath with no water.

I stand up and wrap a thick terry cloth robe around me and glide out through the bedroom, down the hall, into the study, and around the imposing desk. I stop in front of the computer. I think of Remy's note. I think of Mr. Delso and how easily he brushed off his late friend's "nurse," of how easily Harold himself could brush me off when

something as petty as football or golf was on his mind. I think of my father putting one leg in the window of his stock car and flashing a smile at his bride as he swings his other leg into the hatch. I lower myself into the seat and place my hands on the cool desk surface on either side of the keyboard. I look at the dark computer screen and think about all I have to say.

THE END

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## Vita

Charles Brian Conn was born in Cleveland, TN to parents Charles Paul and Darlia McLuhan Conn. He was last of three children, with two older sisters, Vanessa and Heather. He enrolled and completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology at Lee College in 1996, during which time he completed the Semester In Europe study abroad program, based in Cambridge, England. During this semester, he concentrated on English and creative writing, completing a novella for his independent study project. This marked the beginning of his academic interest in creative writing, although it would be over a decade before this interest was nurtured further.

Upon receiving the bachelor's degree, Brian worked for his alma mater, now Lee University, in the area of Admissions and Recruitment and more recently as the Director of Public Information, which is his current position. In 2007, he enrolled at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, to pursue the Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing: Prose, graduating in May of 2010.

He and his wife of almost fifteen years, Kelly Atkins Conn, have two children, Lorne Elizabeth and Charles Oliver.