

Kelley Rae

Blue Beach

Running just west of the town [Romney] at the base of the South Branch Mountain, of peculiar attractions, is the fast flowing river. Here the tourists and seekers of pleasure find cool nights in summer, and glowing hearthstones in winter; wild game in the mountains for winter sport, and abundant fishing in the far-famed river. Certainly, no sportsman can be found who is in ignorance of the "Branch" and its stories.

-Cartmell's History, 1909

My family, like other families we knew, spent every summer at a place we called camp—not “our camp” or “the camp,” just “camp.” Camp was, and is, a stretch of wilderness along the South Branch River just off Route 28, the same road we lived on but seventeen miles farther south. When I was a baby, we camped in tents, lean-tos, and trailers. By the time I was five or so, my father’s extended family shared a small cabin, leased from a farmer who owned the land. This building itself was also called, simply, “camp.”

We never thought of going anywhere else besides camp in the summer—there was no talk of the beach, and I didn’t know places like Disney World existed. Our family spent time together in a way that was not characteristic when we were at camp, particularly my father, who was absent from my life except when we were on the river. We stopped

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going every summer about a year after he died in 1969, so I often think of Dad and camp together. This was back when summer was like another country—exotic, wild, and filled with possibilities.

Just as we all have unique fingerprints, each river has its own motion, smells, and sounds. This place protected us from the outside world, filtering out the pressures of ordinary life and civilization. All the constraints of modern times were left somewhere beyond the banks of the river. It was also equalizing—we were all the same there. Adults returned from camp each year like children again, but ironically, I left my childhood there. I often think if I go there, I can find it.

My father was a troubleshooter for Sun Oil Company, and though I'm not exactly sure what kind of troubles he shot, he was good at what he did for them. Because of this, we were sent all around the tri-state area wherever there was a problem. As we moved from place to place and town to town, camp became the only constant for us. I was always the new kid in school, but camp was the known, and it knew me. Camp was the steadying force in our lives.

When Dad went to camp, I could see frustration lift from his face. The frowns disappeared like the soothing ripples of the river traveling shoreward. He was a child like me in the brief time we were there each year. Back at home, Argus, the muscular German shepherd and trained police dog who rarely left his side, was a protector, a watchdog, and Dad's right-hand man. At camp, the two played on the shore like any boy and his dog. And his mother, Grandma Aggie, who was fiercely attached to Dad, would pick up on this freedom as well—she was healthy and relaxed at camp in a way she never was at home.

Grandma Aggie and I were best friends, too. I was her main helper when it came to getting ready to go to camp each June. The ritual of preparing for a summer there was exhausting, as if we were going half-way around the world instead of just down the road. Grandma Aggie would basically empty the entire contents of her cabinets into her Ford station wagon, using my brother Wayne and I as porters. We would have cans of A&P soda stacked on top of one another, suitcases, laundry baskets, cleaning supplies, and every pot and pan in Grandma Aggie's kitchen. Hoping we hadn't forgotten anything, we would climb into the car and drive the seventeen miles to camp—long miles for children. Grandma Aggie drove that old car with her square chin set like she was on a mission.

As we drove, we sang the old songs, like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” “My Darling Clementine,” and “The Titanic Song”—*Oh they built the ship Titanic to sail the ocean blue and they thought they had a ship that the water couldn’t go through . . .* We would meet everyone else at camp: Mom would bring my baby sister Sue and my cousins, Darlena and Kennetta. Granddad Otis drove his Ford truck with the three-speed on the column, hauling big blue plastic barrels, which he would later fill with drinking water from the springs in Springfield. My father was usually on the road during the week and would come down for weekends.

I could always tell when we were halfway to camp by the moisture in the air. The pungent mustiness of the river’s edge drew me in closer with each mile we crossed. Wayne, with his butterball body and short legs that barely went over the seat, could never sit still, and we didn’t have seat belts in those days. “Scooch back over here ’fore you fall off,” Grandma Aggie would say over and over, but he would tumble off and hit the floorboards time and again.

As we rounded the big turn near Springfield, the trees took on a deeper hue of green against the sheer presence of South Branch Mountain. We would pass under the B&O Railway Bridge, marking the almost-there point. If there was a train on the track Grandma Aggie would say, “Here comes a train, now duck yer heads.”

As we passed Millesons Mill, the hills changed into jagged borders of gray shale, which gracefully transformed into cliff faces as we drove. On the last face before the bridge, known as the rocks, deeply carved into the orange and brown mottled rock, were the words JESUS SAVES, all in capital letters. Grandma Aggie said the words each time we passed them as if she had just noticed them for the first time. She told me they had been there for as long as she remembered. She said, “Sissy,” which was my childhood name, “they’re one of the few things you can count on being here, them words. Them words and them rocks’ll be there for always. You can count on that.”

Driving onto the bridge, I held my breath from a mixture of anticipation and fear of the bridge itself. My mother’s father had terrified me with his tales of the Great Flood of 1936, which washed away bridges and the homes beside them “as if they’d never been.” Cows were wedged under bridge girders, houses crumpled like accordions, cars stood on end against telephone poles. I heard tell of Indian mounds being uplifted and carried along, their skeletons released, floating in waterborne coffins of debris. Nothing was sacred when it came to the river. The river wouldn’t leave the bridge there for long.

But once we crossed it, we were in our other world.

Camp sat on an oval among other lopsided buildings folks called

home from June to September. Some were nothing more than ramshackle structures made up of a hodgepodge of small trailers connected to additions or screened porches. The Wigger family had a small camper, the kind you pull, parked on cinder blocks with a wood addition attached. They slept in the camper part and lived and cooked in the screened-in addition.

Granddad Otis would already be at our camp, having come in with Argus the day before we arrived. He cleaned out the sticks and branches washed up by the high waters along the steps leading to the dock. He swept out the winter dust from all the cracks and crevices. He would look for water damage and plug in the old, loud refrigerator that sounded like a car to see if it still worked, and then he'd hook up the propane stove. Granddad Otis was a gadget man, and in one of his resourceful modes, he had rigged piping from the camp to the river to bring in water for cleaning. The lead pipes traveled the distance from camp underground until they reached the embankment, where they came shot-straight out of the soil at a forty-five-degree angle, attaching to a pump that sat on the shore by the river. He had also built our dock using sealed, empty barrels underneath to float the wooden platforms. Beneath my weight, the barrels would roll and sway with the motion of the river, causing ripples in the water to angle back along the shoreline.

Camp was just three small rooms, a living room/kitchen combination with two small bedrooms. The couch in the living room pulled out into a two-person bed. Each of the two bedrooms had a full-size bed, but the one closest to the road also had two cots. All of the covers and pillows smelled of the river's deep dampness. Mom and Dad would take the bedroom closest to the river. Sue would sleep with them too. Grandma Aggie, Wayne, and I would take the large bed and Kanna and Darlena the cots. That left the pullout for Granddad Otis. Sometimes, our cousins would come up from Baltimore and we'd all have to cram in there somehow. I'm not sure how—we always found room no matter who showed up, even if one or more of us had to find places for the night with the other campers.

There was a screened porch on the river side of camp, which was filled with rafts, floats, flippers, snorkels, inner tubes, and other river gear. The Catawba trees—we called them Indian cigar trees—hung their cigars (seed pods) down against the camp. At night, the cigars floated in the breeze, massaging the porch screen, making scratching sounds like field mice.

Our neighbors, the Bluebaughs, sported a very pink trailer next to a very pink porch, and I never understood that. I thought it should've been blue—after all, they were the Bluebaughs on Blue Beach. Mrs. Bluebaugh wore high-heeled, pink powder-puff slippers down to their

very pink dock in the mornings. I used to wonder why the heels never caught in the cracks. Wayne and I rarely wore shoes. We couldn't deprive ourselves of the pleasure of squishing the river mud between our toes.

As a child I did not know how Blue Beach got its name, but it had nothing to do with the color blue; the water was more of a murky green. A family named Blue were first settlers there. And the "beach" certainly wasn't much of one, just two or three feet of loose, brown silt embedded with twigs, tree bark, and various symbols of civilization, like pop tops or cigarette butts. Sometimes a rusty can would wash up and stick dangerously out of the silt, just waiting for one of us to step on it. Every flood brought with it a whole variety of objects: old tires, appliances, and misshapen pieces of metal, twisted by the river's swift motion. As the water receded, odds and ends were always left behind. But even if it was ungraceful and unsophisticated, it was ours. And when I looked out onto the water, I could see the cliffs with the tall trees fanning along the opposite shore, all upside down in its reflection.

Once we'd unpacked the car, I'd flee from my little brother as fast as I could. If Wayne and I had to hang out together for more than an hour it wasn't pretty—our playing quickly turned into warfare. Kenny would be the first person I sought out. His family's camp was next to ours going away from the bridge. Kenny was my best friend during the summer, and camp wasn't complete without him. He was the fearless leader, and I the loyal follower. He was a squirt—short, thin, wiry, and a "wiseacre," according to my grandpa. The summer my father died, 1969, Kenny was eleven and I was ten, though he was more sophisticated than I because he'd been exposed to his older sister's escapades for years.

His sister, Angela, was a 38 double D, and she paraded her assets well. The year before, as Kenny drank his first beer out of a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon one night, he loosened the threads in her bikini top. The next day, as she was showing off her talents on the skis, the top snapped and landed on her boyfriend's head. He was skiing right beside her. He couldn't see and panicked. He grabbed at the brassiere, lost his balance and did a double-D cartwheel on the water before he finally sank. Of course, everyone assumed it was an accident, but Angela was the center of attention from then on. Kenny had really created a monster.

When I finally tracked Kenny down, he acted as if we hadn't been separated for most of a year. He came up to me, put his hands on his hips and said, "Well, let's go." His dark straight hair was always in his eyes, and his skin looked dark even at the beginning of summer. I was jealous of his easy tan; I stayed white all the way through August.

“Hey,” I said, “When did you get here? And where’re we going?”

“Five minutes ago and up on the hill.”

“To the graveyard? No way. I just got here.”

“Aw, come on. You got nothing against fun.”

“Fun?” I didn’t think it was that much fun. But he knew I wouldn’t back down. I would shrug my acceptance and we’d slowly wander up off the dock. We would pass the communal privy and a pile of empty Pabst Blue Ribbon cans. We would cross over the open field where we sometimes found arrowheads, heading for the footbridge that connected with Graveyard Hill about halfway up. We would take a shortcut on the back road and cross it onto a well-kept lawn of a place we called The Dutch House, which had ornamental windmills peacefully moving in time next to life-size figures of a Dutch boy and girl. They stood, as if waiting for our return, their arms beckoning us against the clear spring sky. There were many places along the back road that were well kept, yet empty like this one. It was a mystery. I remember thinking that maybe people actually lived there all year and just went somewhere else for the summer. That was the only way I could understand their abandonment.

We trudged up to the top of the hill—a hell of a place to put a graveyard, as Grandma Aggie put it. The headstones were enclosed in a circular fence of wrought iron and stone, and ivy had grown through all the crevices, forming a natural lock over the gate entrance. Kenny dug through his back pocket, handing his Chiclets and hair comb to me. He finally produced his ivory-handled penknife, like he was a magician entertaining an audience, waving it all around like a conductor.

“Do you suppose we’re messing with ancient spirits by doing this?” Kenny asked, severing the vine.

“No,” I said. “I mean, we come here every year. You’d think if spirits were going to get mad, they’d’ve done it before now.” He was so dumb sometimes.

Kenny managed to open the gate enough so we could squeeze through. Most of the badly deteriorated headstones were still readable. One, dated 1638 and lettered in a calligraphic script, had crumbled away at its edges until the name Theodora was all that was left. Another one, mostly intact, had large, bold letters saying, “The Most Honorable Reverend Charles McDonald, Born August 10, 1768, Departed This World December 12, 1802.” We couldn’t get through most of the overgrowth, so we had to be content to examine what was right in front of us until Kenny said, “This one looks dug up!”

That’s all it took. I scrambled past, feet flying, scraping my arm on an iron pinnacle of the narrow gate. I heard Kenny’s breathing right behind me, thinking he wasn’t so dumb after all. He tripped, falling

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past me, tumbling halfway down the hill like some invisible force had pushed him. We ran until we reached the field and collapsed on top of each other into a heap of quivering fear—four arms and four legs all jumbled together.

When we heard someone coming, I think we half-expected to see dead corpses with worms squirming out of their eye sockets, running us down and hunting us to the ends of the earth, or at least until Paw Paw. Instead, it was just Wayne. He was wide-eyed and innocent as he came up to us, bait bucket in hand, and said, “You’ve been to the graveyard.”

We got up then, laughing, dusting the soot from our pants.

“What you got in the pail, Wayne?” I asked.

He looked down into the bucket as if he had forgotten what was in there and said, “Well, um...let’s see...oh! Hellgram...Hellogram...Hellgrammites and some crayfish. Me and Granddad Otis’s going fishing for a ten-pound bass. You wanna come?”

“No,” I said. “We got more important things to take care of.”

“Yeah, like what?” he said.

“We gotta get the inner tubes ready for the ripples.”

“No, you can’t. Grandma Aggie says no swimming till June 16 and that’s not till tomorrow, the water’s not warm till then, so you can’t go today.”

“Get a grip, shrimp,” Kenny butted in.

“Listen,” I said, “Stop running your mouth and go fishing.” Anything to get rid of Wayne.

I could never have imagined that my next trip to a cemetery—just some short weeks later—I’d be throwing dirt on my father’s grave.

Kenny was generally the leader, but sometimes he relied on me to know what to do. Like when we found the dead babies.

Dr. Whiteman’s camp sat dark and foreboding in our little oval of camps. I didn’t know what kind of doctor he was, only that he’d been a scary white-haired man with crazy eyebrows. He’d died two years earlier and his camp had been empty ever since. We’d go there occasionally to sit on his back patio, where an intricate latticework pattern behind a breezeway provided shade for telling tales or daring dares. Beside the breezeway was a shed filled with lumber, tools, paint, snorkels, old clothes and empty containers all in a jumble. Camp was like that, though—mysterious and mostly unexplainable things were everywhere.

I suppose the idea was in the back of my mind for a while, but at

the time, it seemed like a brainstorm. We'd fix his camp up for our own! We all agreed—Kenny, me, and Wayne, whom we'd agreed to let in with the plan of making him do the dirty work.

It wasn't hard to get inside. None of the camps were secured in any way other than a locked door, which we could unlock just by climbing in a window. Kenny said, "Shrimp here is too short to reach the door lock and I got the best hearin' in case someone comes, so you gotta go."

"All right, I'll go, but if you guys leave me here, I'll chase you down and beat you senseless," I said, looking back with one foot through the window. "You got me?" I figured Kenny might have agreed to all of this just so they could run off once I was inside, but their heads nodded in agreement. I got through and started to look around. The gingham curtains were crisp with age, and a layer of dust covered the entire place like it had been buried already. My minions were mumbling outside, so I went to let them in.

We started to clean the kitchen and worked our way into the den, or what looked like a den. I took the closet. There were some large boxes on the bottom. I used one to stand on so I could reach the top. Mostly papers and files lined the high shelf, so I just tidied them up a bit. As I sat down to catch my dust-choked breath, the box gave way slightly and I felt what appeared to be large jars, cold to the touch. My curiosity got the better of me and I put my hand into the box and suddenly felt a chill. I pulled out a heavy glass jar, almost letting it slip through my fingers, then pulling it close to my body so it wouldn't drop. My heart started to skip beats, my breath came in short, quick gasps, and my palms grew sweaty as my eyes focused on its content.

The jar held a human fetus.

I was never so scared before, so scared that I forgot to breathe and got dizzy because of it. I opened the box up all of the way. Three more fetuses in various stages of growth slept inside, ranging from fist size to the size of a newborn. Why would Dr. Whiteman keep dead babies in jars? Did he study them? Were they miscarriages? I didn't even know Dr. Whiteman was *that* kind of a doctor. Then it dawned on me: maybe they were abortions. I knew about abortions from television; I knew they were illegal.

They floated in stasis, not seemingly dead, but not alive either. The littlest one looked more like a bird than a potential human being, with nearly formed arms, but not quite. Maybe it was deformed. The biggest one looked as if it could actually already have been born. I wondered who it belonged to or if it would've had someone to love it. Because it was in a fetal position, I couldn't see if it was a boy or a girl, and I couldn't help thinking that it might have been beautiful alive. But as it

floated in the fluid, its skin blue tinged with purple, it wasn't very pretty.

"You guys," I said in a very weak and shaky voice, "Come here."

I guess they knew something was wrong by my tone, for they were there at my side in seconds, dirt on their faces and dust in their hair. Their eyes grew wide as they looked at the jars. A minute or two passed before anyone spoke.

"Wow! I ain't never seen unborn babies before," Kenny said.

Wayne asked, "Are they alive?"

"No," I said. "Would they be in jars if they were?"

"Why are they here?" asked Kenny.

"I don't know and I'm not sure I want to," I replied.

"Maybe he studied them or something, like research," Kenny guessed.

"Here, where people vacation?" I asked. "Why would he do that and why would he leave them here?"

"What are we gonna do with them?" Wayne asked.

Kenny interrupted with, "Maybe there are some hearts and livers here too."

"Yeah," Wayne added. "Or some fingers or toes."

"Okay, that's enough." Suddenly, I felt nauseous.

None of us wanted to leave them there; the general consensus was that we should bury them, but that day we ended up putting them in the refrigerator.

In the refrigerator!

We left Dr. Whiteman's camp and never returned. We gave that camp a wide berth from then on and I never attempted illegal entry again. We never told anyone about the babies, because then we would have had to tell how we got into Dr. Whiteman's camp. We were stuck with our horrible secret image of dead babies floating lifeless in jars in Mr. Whiteman's refrigerator.

Whenever it rained, expeditions to cemeteries and abandoned camps were off. We cradled ourselves inside camp's protective walls, listening as the black clouds trickled musical raindrops onto the camp's tin roof. Grandma Aggie never tired of playing games, and on rainy days Darlena, Kannetta, and I would sit around playing with her for hours—Monopoly marathons, Yahtzee championships, rummy tournaments, and canasta competitions, with hors d'oeuvres on the side, usually saline crackers with Vienna sausages cut open and laid on them, covered with catsup. Mom, who didn't like games, would read or go to a friend's camp. Dad, if he was there, would usually be elsewhere, too, playing cards with Grandpa Otis and the other men.

On one rainy day, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a little mouse scurry under the couch. Mom saw it and screamed. I jumped up from the card game to look for its nest. She and Grandma Aggie were up on chairs in seconds, doing little dances.

Granddad Otis pulled out the couch but couldn't see where it had gone. I ran to get his flashlight as he turned over the couch. As soon as he did, a matted nest full of mice fell out. They were all pink so they must have been newborn. The mother was still somewhere in the springs of the couch. Granddad Otis said, "Well, looky here. Looky at these little critters." It sometimes amazed me how gentle and concerned this man could be, a man who could shoot squirrels, pull off their skin like a one-piece jumpsuit, cut off their heads, boil them, crack open the skulls, and eat the brains.

Wayne said, "Let me see 'em. I wanna see."

"I saw it first," I said.

Mom yelled, "You'll get a disease!"

Granddad Otis said, "Don't worry, Tootie, they's already dead. Their momma must not been able to get enough to eat." He picked up the nest like it was sacred and took it out in the rain. I don't know if he buried them, since the soil was so wet. The rain most likely washed through like a miniature flood. I bawled my head off, even though I wasn't fond of mouse turds in the dresser drawers. It seemed as if they never had a chance. Grandma Aggie handed me a tissue, the cheap kind from A&P, the kind that rubbed your nose raw.

Different sections of the river hosted different kinds of get-togethers. Each area was like its own community, and each community had its own traditions. Our traditions were corn roasts and community stew. The fire Granddad Otis built to cook the corn didn't even seem hot in July as we stood around it, watching. He'd build it until we could see its reflection in the stillness of the river. Everyone would come, bringing a covered dish. We usually ate outside unless it was raining. The light of the fire danced from face to eager face.

On stew night, everyone came to our camp and lined up on the three weathered picnic tables, playing music while the stew cooked. If my father was there, he and his best friend Roy would play their guitars. When she wasn't dancing on top of the tables, Grandma Aggie would sing one of her favorite songs, like "Patches." Her voice was full of sorrow when she sang it. This song was special to Grandma Aggie because I think she associated it with the loss of Robert Loy, her first love, and when she sang it, it made me cry.

Mom sometimes sang along with Dad and his best friend Roy on "The Butcher's Boy" or other folk songs. It seemed to me like all sorrow

and heartbreak came from men.

I was waiting for Grandma Aggie to get up on the picnic table and do her little jig. Nearly everyone at camp was good-natured and loved to motivate ole Aggie into dancing. They would clap and cheer her on. It was the highlight of the evening for me. Her skinny little legs would move in time to the music. People would shout, “Come on, Aggie, now shake it, woman.” And soon they’d have everyone’s Grandma Aggie up there if at all possible. I enjoyed seeing adults having a good time. It meant life probably wasn’t over after parenthood and that was reassuring. The river was a reminder that some things were there for us, and as Wayne and I sat on the glider beside it, we were comforted by its presence.

After a while, the string of plastic Chinese lanterns lit up the area out back, so the adults could ready the picnic tables for the night’s games. They usually played spoons, a physical card game that used one less spoon than the number of players. They lined them up across the top of the picnic table, and when a certain sequence of cards came into play, there was a mad scramble for the spoons. Whoever was left without a spoon was out of the game. Dad broke his thumb once when the picnic bench fell backwards and he tried to balance it with his hand. Spoons wasn’t a game for kids, so we were usually put to bed. However, it wasn’t hard to tell what was happening by the sounds of laughter and the occasional screams from the backyard. This was the way we were lulled to sleep most nights by the river.

I was up early in the mornings, staying only long enough to grab toast on the way out of the door. There was no television to fight over, and the only modern appliance we possessed was a broken radio forever positioned on a Top 40 station. We used it to prop open the window.

Kenny met me at the door. We were synchronized—in tune with each other, like we were in tune with camp. We walked next to the river on the backside of the camps with Argus following. The closer we got to the bridge, the higher the bank rose above the water. Since most of the camps upriver were elevated ten to twelve feet above the water line, getting onto the docks became more difficult. This forced people upriver to find ingenious ways of getting down the embankment. There also seemed to be an underlying competition as to who could come up with the most unique idea. It was amazing to me, what people did to thwart nature. First, decks or landings were built roughly level with the banks. Various attachments were used to support them, such as lumber and railroad ties. Then, steps were placed at odd angles. Sometimes they built second decks or landings halfway down. We zigzagged our way over and across these pieces of modern architecture to our destina-

tion: the rope swing.

The rope hung from a tall old oak that was embedded in the bank about twelve feet above the water. The handle was a triangular piece of metal tied onto the rope. Attached to it was another short rope we used to tie the entire contraption to the tree, or to drag it back on the return swing. Boards were nailed randomly onto the tree, which served as steps. Climbing the steps added another four feet to the already immense height. I imagined this was as good a way as any to meet the cool June water for the first time. The swing didn't bother me, and I didn't mind the tree. It was the distance I had to jump that gave me a nervous tic in my left eye.

I pretended to adjust my swimsuit so that Kenny was first. He made it look so easy, boldly climbing the steps, grabbing the handle, giving a Tarzan yell, and swinging. He plunged smoothly into the water and resurfaced a moment later with a grin on his face. It made me ill. I tried to think of an excuse but my lips wouldn't mouth one. I had to save face, so I got on the steps, grabbed the handle, and did what any intelligent person would do: I shut my eyes and jumped.

The jump nearly gave me a heart attack, but I got so caught up in the soothing swinging motion that, by the time I heard Kenny screaming and Argus barking, I had come to a dead stop. I remember thinking if I could just hang onto that metal bar, I'd be safe. I wouldn't have to fall into the river. I didn't want to fall underneath the surface, where I couldn't see what was there. I could swing above it forever.

I realized what I had done, so I opened my eyes. Kenny was yelling, "Don't let go, look, look under you!" I looked down in time to see a water moccasin right beneath me. Argus was barking so furiously that saliva was beading up at the corners of his mouth. Kenny had his collar to keep him from going after it. I hung onto that metal handle with all my might, wanting to throw up. I only had to wait for a moment while the snake passed, but it felt like an eternity. It turns out the snake was really dead, but I didn't know that then. By the time I let go of the handle and sank underwater, I knew something was wrong. My arm was stuck, pulled from the socket. It had happened before and it was awful. I started to yell while I tried to keep myself afloat with one arm. Kenny swam out with an inner tube and helped me on. All the while, my arm was sticking straight up in the air. I felt like a German sub, scoping the enemy.

They took me to Granddad Otis, and he massaged my shoulder while he soothingly talked to me. "Don't fret yourself now, we'll get it back where it goes." Then all at once, while he kept me distracted with his slow talk, he popped it back into the socket. Once it was back in, I felt better.

When I heard the siren, faintly at first, I knew it would be Dad. He had a knack for causing calamity.

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When I heard the siren, faintly at first, I knew it would be Dad. He had a knack for causing calamity. He flew over the bridge, his Roadster motorcycle barely touching the road. Dad was fond of fast cars and motorcycles. The only problem was that he continually wrecked them. Not only did he damage most of them beyond repair, but he also managed to mangle a body part of his own in the process. When Mom was still pregnant with my baby sister, he wrapped his car around a telephone pole. It looked like an accordion. He escaped, which was a miracle, but he broke his back and had to wear a neck brace for months as a reminder of his immortality.

My father was like that—he demanded attention—like my sore, dislocated arm from the tree swing. Once he walked into a room, all attention turned toward him. To me he was overwhelming. To be around him was to exist in his shadow. He was large and loud, and he frightened me most of the time. Everyone idolized him, his crazy antics, and his way of treating people better than they expected. He was better than some men were and worse than others. He and my mother had an off-again, on-again relationship and were even divorced once and then remarried. He hit her on more than one occasion. I was a witness to some of this, although we all managed to hide it well. I never really knew the extent of his outbursts. I suppose few things are flawless. He was hard on Mom, expecting her to be all the things he wasn't.

All in all, we came to expect things to happen when Dad was around—not necessarily good things, either. Another service we didn't have at camp was the law, and it only came when it followed my father. His entrance to camp that day was no exception.

He made a left turn from the bridge onto Long Road, and then he cut through a neighbor's yard and parked behind our camp. He hopped off, kissed Mom, hugged Grandma Aggie, tousled Wayne's hair, and said, "What's for dinner? I'm starved." Meanwhile, the sheriff's car slowly cruised by, tracking my father's route, stopping and looking at each camp for a few seconds and then moving on. He slowed to a stop like he was going to get out and ask questions about Dad, but then Argus took off after his car and tried to gnaw the bumper off, so he kept moving. I looked at the sheriff's car, then at Dad. His casual attitude was enough to relax me, so I said, "How long can you stay, Dad?"

"Long enough to see you go off that swing," he said with a wink

I'd like to say that the last time I saw my father was skiing, but it's not. I have chosen it as my last image of him, though, because my last image was not one I want to keep.

and a nod toward the water.

"Sorry, you're too late. I've already gone."

"Don't you wanna do it once more just for me?" he teased. Wayne hopped onto his lap, and Dad said, "Hey, my Pepsi Generation man," like the TV commercial. He called Wayne that because Wayne wanted to drive a Pepsi truck when he grew up.

Granddad Otis asked, "You be driving too fast again, son?"

"Nah," Dad said, "I just took a little short cut is all, Pop."

Grandma Aggie said, "Son, I wish you'd sell that Harley and that there little piece of trouble, too," referring to the Roadster.

"Oh, Mom, come on, you only live once."

"No," she said. "Not you, Keith, you're working on number four about now."

I remember how we got the call, late one night, about his automobile accident the previous year. We were living in Pennsylvania and Dad was visiting Grandma Aggie in West Virginia. Mom was pregnant with Sue at the time. We traveled for hours, Mom with her belly tight and large. We ended up staying at Grandma Aggie's for three months while Dad was laid up in the hospital. I guess that's what made him appear immortal to me. He kept surviving the most devastating injuries.

Granddad Otis took Dad aside. I was waiting to see if Granddad Otis would have one of his fighting spells after he talked with Dad. But he didn't. He just picked up his fishing rod and tackle box and walked on toward the river. Fishing was Granddad Otis's answer to life's problems.

I'd like to say that the last time I saw my father was skiing, but it's not. I have chosen it as my last image of him, though, because my last image was not one I want to keep. The morning I choose to remember is the morning Wayne and I wanted to learn how to ski. Granddad Otis did his best to explain the process to us in a way we could understand. I couldn't get my knees to straighten out, so I ended up skiing around the river in a squat, much to my embarrassment. I was relieved when it was Wayne's turn because he screwed up much worse than I had. He fell right off, but he didn't let go of the rope. He hung on while he was being pulled under the water. Granddad Otis didn't notice until I waved my hands to let him know Wayne's predicament. Wayne was waterlogged when he got onto the dock, water running from his ears and his nose.

Dad had been standing up on the bank observing the action. He was dressed in his suit for a meeting at work. He strode down onto the dock, kicked off his shoes, slipped on the skis, and then he grabbed the rope and said, "Hit it, Pop." He had dark eyes and a square jaw, and he was very handsome. I see him in my brother, and some say I look like him, too. Off he went like he owned the damned river, which of course we assumed he did. There he was in a three-piece double-breasted suit, minus the wing tips, fighting the current behind the boat Granddad Otis had rebuilt. His 200-pound, six-foot form never revealed an inch of clumsiness. His silhouette against the tall cliffs was like a Greek god—maybe Dionysus. He didn't falter or, as I recall, blink an eye. Other skiers gave him the right of way as they called greetings to him: "Hey you son of a bitch, what'll you think of next?" or "What a way to mix business with pleasure!" He made his circle around the river, and as he came in near the dock, he beached the skis and slipped his feet, one at a time, out of them and then placed them onto the dock. He managed all this while wetting only the bottoms of his pants. He said, "Now do it like that," as he got on his motorcycle, tousled Wayne's hair and left for work.

Dad's last Fourth of July was in 1969. He died a few weeks later. He had developed a kink in his intestines, like the turmoil of his life took up residence there and demanded to be recognized. He doubled over and called my grandmother to take him to the hospital.

It was an enigma to us all, such a young man falling ill and dying within a week. The doctors removed twenty-seven feet of intestines, but he contracted gangrene and later died of shock. He was only thirty years old.

The summer of '69 was the beginning and the ending of what I knew and loved. Grandma Aggie was grief-stricken; she never recovered. Dad wasn't supposed to have anything to drink, but Grandma Aggie always gave Dad whatever he asked for. He kept asking for water the night he died. Since he died of shock, Mom thinks it was the water that did it.

Argus disappeared shortly afterwards. We heard tales of him from Camp Cliffside, the Boy Scout camp across the river. I could see him as their mascot, saving drowning boys or killing snakes as the Scouts took long hikes in the woods—a piece of my father living on forever at Blue Beach.

Grandma Aggie, who had already lost one lung to cancer, never stopped smoking. She died a slow and agonizing death that began with my father's death echo and ended five years later. She had been carrying cancer around in the other lung as well. By the time she was diag-

nosed, it was too late. I think she knew and didn't care. My mother and my grandmother grew so far apart that Grandma Aggie and I rarely saw one another. I wasn't even at Grandma Aggie's side when she died, a nightmare I continued to relive for many years afterward.

When my mother remarried, we moved over the state line to Maryland. I was fourteen. I saw Kenny infrequently. The last time I saw him was when he had a huge party at his parents' house and I drank too many sloe gin fizzes and threw up in his kitchen sink. I later heard he was in jail for dealing drugs.

It seemed as though the most important people in my life had just vanished from the world I knew. I felt abandoned along with the childhood innocence I would never again find. And I tried. When I was sixteen, my boyfriend and I hitchhiked to camp. We stopped to see Granddad Otis on the way. He was excited to see me and told me about what he wanted me to do with a few of his belongings in the event of his death. It was as if he knew. My boyfriend and I went on down to camp with our backpacks and provisions. The rains had once again flooded the area and the camp was filled with mud. It took us two days to scrub the gray residue from the walls and floor. We removed most of the water-damaged furniture, pulling it out onto the grass to hopefully dry it out, revive it, despite the wet ground. It was early spring, so no one else had ventured into the soginess. I have never cleaned so rigorously.

Since that time in my life, the area has once again been completely flooded. Sometimes I imagine camp swirling in a tornado of water—I see those dead babies falling out of the refrigerator and I hope the water frees them from their glass caskets. I hope they get buried properly under the river mud, and then the child I left behind won't be alone.

That summer in 1969, I went fishing with Dad—the first and only time. That my brother went along was assumed. I, however, was not usually invited. This time, I wiggled my way into the group by being persistent and probably annoying.

We got our bait from Fischer's store, and I always thought that was funny—even though it was spelled differently. It was a small store on Route 28 with a huge cement trough where thousands of tiny minnows (we called them minnies) swam. I loved sitting on the edge of the trough and watch them frantically fighting to escape the net. I thought they were cute and really didn't want to use them as bait. I preferred American cheese—anything without eyes.

The fog moved smoothly over the surface of the river the night Granddad Otis, Dad, Wayne, and I pushed the outboard away from the dock. The night noises—crickets, bullfrogs, and owls—blended with the

soft ripples of water lapping against the boat. We kept our voices low as we glided downriver against the light of the moon.

Grandma Aggie used to tell us, “Don’t drift too far down that river or you’ll end up in Paw Paw.” She said it with such conviction that Paw Paw became the epitome of all that was wrong in the world. This nightmare hick town from the Twilight Zone used to plague my imagination. I could just imagine us drifting downriver, somewhere near Main Street, Paw Paw, West Virginia, lost forever.

As we went downriver Granddad Otis maneuvered to avoid a piece of the old bridge that was left from one of the floods. Marked with a plastic milk container so boaters could avoid hitting it, this large, bent arc of metal extended from a depth of about fifteen feet to just three feet below the surface, depending on water level. If my feet touched it when I drifted past, tubing or swimming, the bottom of my stomach would cave in and chills would shiver up and down my body. I hated the unseen.

The nights were surreal. The moon’s reflection off the surface of the river belied the water’s darkness. They complemented one another. If I were to stand on the bridge and look down on the water, the moon’s light would cut a crooked path on the river’s surface, leading all the way down to the last camp.

We finally reached the ripples and went past them to where the water once again became still. Two little islands jutted up from the surface, looking like matching ferrymen on rafts. Between the two islands was a near-stagnant pool that was home to thousands of larvae, mostly tadpoles. They lost their tails and came onto shore in huge numbers. Whenever I would set my foot onto the white-pebbled shore, baby frogs jumped out of my way. The previous year, I had put a bunch of them in a metal recipe box to take home, but I ended up forgetting them. It was a hot summer and when we returned the next weekend, I opened the lid to find a slew of little frog skeletons, clinging desperately to their metal coffin. They had baked all week in the hot sun. I was a murderer. Granddad Otis went gigging all the time for frogs, but it never seemed as horrible as what I had done.

As we drifted past Frog Island, a light mist developed and I shivered a little. Dad took off his jacket and laid it on my shoulders.

I always had trouble casting. The rod seemed to go one way and my arm the other. I could never get them synchronized. Wayne thrust his line out onto the marbled, dark surface and I tried to do the same, but my wrist wasn’t quick enough. Dad put his hands on mine and rocked my wrist back and forth until the momentum grew and my line landed out close to the others.

Wayne was a pro at all this and was catching one fish after the

other. I had to put worm after worm on my hook, because the sly fish would just bite around the hook. Secretly I was glad the fish weren't getting harpooned by *my* fishing pole. I wanted to use the cheese I had crammed in my pocket, but I knew these real fishermen wouldn't approve. I really didn't want to hurt those minnows or worms, so I just grazed the membrane lightly until it looked like it was attached. My line dangled straight in the water. I wanted it to dance around and come alive, just once. I could forgive myself just once. I think I never would have felt the need to fish again if just once I could catch something better than Wayne could.

The mist turned into a light rain and I was ready to leave, but I tried to be strong. I wanted to show my father I could catch one, too, only my patience was waning. I started to get antsy and couldn't sit still. I made the boat rock from side to side.

"Dad, could we please go back now? It's really starting to rain and you know Grandma Aggie won't want us catching our death," I said, thinking my parental logic would get me back to the camp without my appearing weak.

"You didn't have to come, Sissy," he said.

"I know. I wanted to."

"You're a trouper."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. You may not be a good fisherman, but you can hit a mean baseball and jump higher than any boy I know." He put his arm around my shoulder, and I laid my head on his chest. Men didn't do much hugging in my family. I don't think they knew how. But when his arm went around me, I stopped feeling the rain. I stayed there all that night fishing with them. I didn't catch a thing.