

The Creek

by Randall Goble

Running along side the acre of land where my grandparent's lived during the bulk of my childhood runs a quiet, spring-fed tributary. It flows north, meandering through pine forests, pastures and small patches of swamp. There were stretches of exposed, prehistoric limestone that would split true with the tap of a hammer, sometimes revealing the fossil of some prehistoric leaf within. Gentle rapids cascaded over these rocks, creating vortexes that sometimes trapped fish in isolated pools, leaving them hungry and ripe for the catching.

I can still taste the gritty water. I feel the aching ear infections and the cramping diarrhea that sometimes followed a day's swim. Miniature lawyers argued their cases before the judge and jury, better known as Grandma, about the possibility of being granted a motion to jump in. We swore oaths promising to never go under, to keep the creek out of our ears, to never swallow a drop—and we tried to do so earnestly—but it was nearly impossible to be an alligator, submarine, or sea monster without accidentally soaking our hair.

Spring yielded swarms of hummingbirds, which, by their playful and competitive nature, brought hours of entertainment to my Grandma's kitchen window. She would stand in front of the sink—the muted light of morning pouring in—and we'd talk about her hummingbirds while she sipped coffee from an olive green mug. I would use my arms to hold myself up, craning my neck to see out of the window, my hands firmly planted on the drain board, my legs dangling free with the effortless athleticism of a child. Hummingbirds are aerial jesters custom built for acrobatic flight, but such capabilities are versatile, and I still remember the dull thud of one's beak connecting with another's skull, the culmination of a high-speed dogfight.

At the creek there was always some critter to dispatch, and Grandpa spent hours setting and checking traps. There was the mole trap, that once inserted into the tunnel and set, was triggered by the weight of the animal scurrying through it. Three spring-loaded prongs were then driven through a small, blind, pointy skull—delivering a semi-instant death. Opossums were a constant problem, and they didn't take kindly to being thrown into the creek while still squirming in a live-trap. I got an eerie sense of finality when one disappeared beneath the calm surface, the violent thrashings concealed in the murk. I think of this and an axe, buried to the helve in the shell of an alligator snapping turtle, when people speak of violent video games.

East Texas summers could suck the air clean out of a young pair of lungs. It must have been hell for the old-timers. They slouched in their chairs at the bait shop, drinking coffee. Clear plastic tubes ran across their cheeks and underneath their noses, those same cheeks that sagged under the weight of seventy-odd years, molding their faces into permanent scowls. I know they remember their childhood in black and white, because mine is washed in the beige hue of a 1989 Polaroid. Wood grain paneling and avocado rugs, along with stenciled wallpaper bearing baskets of fruit, floral arrangements and owls, all trapped within a white border. Old men have been sitting in bait shops since the time of Peter, James and John, surrounded by myriad goods all sharing in common only their scarcity within a fifty-mile radius.

Grandpa would hand me a bag of minnows, the opening firmly secured with a rubber band. The bait swam in schools, staring out at me through the plastic, one doomed eye at a time. There were tubs of ice cream beneath the glass counter where the cash register rested. Every flavor a boy and his Grandpa could ask for lay beyond where I could see. The clerk read them all to me, like a teacher calling attendance: strawberry swirl, chocolate, cookies and cream, rocky road.

“Don’t they got any banilla?” I would ask. “I want plain banilla.” We could mail a letter, rent a VHS tape, get a breakfast taco, an ice cream, the latest lure, a box of fireworks, the weekly gossip rolled out between tobacco stained dentures, Little Debbie cupcakes, and a bucket of live night-crawlers, all in a seven-hundred square foot East Texas bait shop.

The hours we spent on the creek passed like drops of water over parched lips. Three boys of elementary school age could stare at corks for an entire morning, bare feet resting on the cool hull of an aluminum boat. Grandpa sat with us, listening to our stories, telling his own, teaching us how to fish, how to be boys, how to eventually become men.

Always wave to passing boats, but never show your stringer, and if you do, don’t tell where you caught ‘em – pick up trash along the bank if you can reach it – crappie play with the bait for a while before they bite – did I ever tell you the one about the tongue tied fellow who sold an outhouse that he guaranteed wouldn’t stink? – catfish like the eyes, so hook your minnow through the head and set the cork for deeper water – don’t cast overhead – don’t cast over another person’s line – there’s no difference between country-western and rock n’ roll anymore – damn it, I said don’t cross over my line – steer clear of alcohol – never throw back a snapping turtle, cut their heads off with pliers – that’s a big fish – here, use the net – I’m proud of you – did I tell you the one about the guy who walks into a bar and bets the bartender he can bite his own left eye? I got a million of ‘em .

The seventies model Oldsmobile station wagon rolling over caliche rocks could vibrate my cheeks to the point of numbness. Grandpa played the harmonica while driving. We seldom wore seat belts. I remember curling up on the warm, back-seat floorboard with my cousins, listening to the road just inches beneath our ears. I would stare into the treetops that rose like the

Red Sea on either side of us. I used to believe that no matter where I was, if I stared into the treetops long and hard enough, they might become the same treetops that I longed for; that I might be transported to Riverside, Texas, 1989, by sheer will-of-consciousness. I find that I still do it from time to time, and I always get the same burning in my gut that I did as a child when I find it to be impossible.

I read, or maybe I heard—or did I dream it?—that some physicists hold time analogous to a record spinning on a turntable, the needle being the now. Maybe that’s why I feel the past—at least *my* past—should be accessible, like an alphabetized album collection, to be experienced at my leisure. Perhaps consciousness is a multitude of intersecting record players, billions of needles traveling billions of tracks, but always there, even when the music has ended. The music ended on June 5th, 2003, for Grandpa. But it’s comforting to think that we’re still sitting in a boat, telling jokes and catching fish on some celestial turntable, even if the stylus has long since moved over and beyond our time together.

Time spent indoors revolved around the kitchen table. Dinner was always eaten there. Grandma’s gravy was the color and consistency of muddy creek-water, tasted like childhood, and was at its best soaked into a slice of buttered bread. Sitting at the table for only nanoseconds at a time, she would watch for an empty glass or an uneaten vegetable. The corners of her mouth pulled downward when she smiled. Her eyes sparkled when Grandpa said, “Thank you, darlin’,” as she passed him the peas. Grandmas like mine take pride in clean plates, full bellies and genuine appreciation.

In the mornings, our bare feet soaked with dew, the grass sticking to our toes, we raced across a sprawling lawn and leapt down onto a concrete pier, hoping to find a cork missing or a bamboo pole doubled over. As small children, we learned about life and death by smashing

minnows here. They popped satisfyingly between concrete and stubby thumbs, much to the consternation of Grandma. As adolescents, we donned insect repellent and spent late nights talking about girls, second base, what beer tastes like, where the fish are probably biting, or where Grandpa might be hiding, waiting to scare the hell right out of us (or into us) with one heave of a rotten log. All disturbances sound like predators and cadavers at three o'clock in the morning on the creek.

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Caney Creek is now a series of disparate puddles set in a contorted trench. When the rains come, the flood gates are opened and water rushes through for a day or so, piling sand upon the piers and fallen trees that line its banks. Between storms, the water stagnates, and the children grow and leave and spread out as the elders die off; and the fishing pole is passed to trembling, unprepared hands that aren't ready to hold it, because we're not ready. We were never ready. Just yesterday we were casting into the trees and crossing over your line and hanging up our lures on the bottom. Just yesterday we were sitting around the fire pile—I'd almost forgotten about the fire pile—waiting for the cane poles to pop, singeing our eyebrows, you singing and slapping your thighs; and I never did learn to play the bones; and I never ate that giant sandwich you wanted to take me to eat because I was vegetarian at the time and for some reason that was important; and I'll never have a million of 'em, because I keep forgetting things; and I never beat you at checkers. And I wasn't there when you thought you were on fire, when you thought you were in hell; but I was there when you sang *Lucille*, and I'm thankful for that. But all I truly want sometimes is to stare into those tree tops and put the record on and hear the one about the tongue-tied fellow who sold the outhouse that he guaranteed wouldn't stink, and then the one about the guy who walks into a bar and bets the bartender that he can bite his own left eye; and

most of all, I want to have been there holding your hand when you were in some kind of hell, because after what you did for me, after all the time you spent with me, after all the attention you paid me, it would mean that I was there in the end to give you that one moment; to have been strong and to not gone to pieces in front of you like I did; to have been the grandson Donald was in those final weeks, and.... Goddamn it, I miss you.