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Memories, Pain,
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Danny Yarger

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Dogslaughter Creek

THERE WAS MUSIC AND magic in the night air, just like there was on most of the nights John Wilson was home. He could see the darkness of the sky above them and between the branches of the trees as he leaned back on the log. The darkness was deep and rich. The night sky in the backwoods of southeast Kentucky had always been different than the night skies in any of the other places that he'd been. It's not that he didn't appreciate the beauty of the night sky anywhere else. He'd been all over the world and had seen night skies that flowed over him and filled him with awe. But it was that none of them made him feel at home like he felt under a dark Kentucky sky.

The light from the fire danced off of the leaves and branches between him and the wonderfully deep sky. He looked around the campfire at the light, dancing on the faces in the little circle. There was a good, sweet feeling deep inside his chest. This feeling was happiness, he was sure. He had not always been sure what it meant to be happy, but on that night, he was. Happiness was what he was feeling right at that moment, the sweet, good feeling deep inside his chest, he was almost positive about it. The only thing that made him doubt it all was that the feeling was very similar to the pain he felt deep in

his chest when he felt lonely as a child. It was kind of a flutter somewhere below his sternum, and a small bit of an electrical sensation going to his stomach and up his neck. It seemed they were the same physical sensation, but this was happiness, not pain... probably.

He looked at the hue of the fire. There were browns, yellows and reds fusing together, licking the knees that were attached to the smiling faces on the other side of the circle. He wasn't sure if it was clearer than any picture or painting he'd ever seen, or if it was the deep darkness of the sky and the feeling in his chest that made him feel like everything at that moment was the best he had ever seen. The colors from the fire seemed to be amplified through the wavy mirage of heat and smoke. The beer that was running through his vision likely played a role in intensifying the brightness in the colors of the fire and deepness of the dark sky. He drank the rest of the beer from the can in hand, in one large swallow, and threw the empty can into the pit.

The pit was two feet in diameter. Eight chairs fit around it comfortably. The smiling faces and the firelight-licked knees in each of the chairs around the pit belonged to either a friend or family member of John's. Next to, behind, or in each of those chairs was a guitar. The night was warm and muggy, so John and his friends didn't really need a fire for warmth. Still, the chairs hugged the fire as if they were in a mid-winter Michigan night. It was the music and the fire and the light and smell

that bonded them to edge of the pit, not the warmth.

He leaned on the log and looked up at the stars and the sky. There was a crescent moon that night. He could not see it through leaves dangling from the branches of the trees. Earlier in the day the crescent moon had been high in the blue sky. The sky that he could see above him was a deep purple, and was filling quickly with stars. Stars that fizzled one by one into the velvet blanket above him. He watched the sparks rising from the fire, dancing upward above the trees. It seemed to him the embers were burning a hole in the night sky leaving a star as they faded. He looked through the trees in an arcing motion from left to right, and could see the velvet become aqua as it stretched toward the last dying thralls of the setting sun. He tried to make out the shapes of the constellations through the limbs of the trees, but they were too broken by the branches, and he was too happy and too drunk.

He got up off the stump that he had been sitting on and drank the last of the beer in his can. He threw the empty can as far as he could into the air. While the can was mid-air, he went to his best quickdraw move to pull the 9mm Lugar out of its holster, and found that it was not there. He continued the quickdraw anyway just to amuse his friends, and yelled out, "Damn it," in fake disgust. He pointed at the can when it was ten feet from the ground and commanded it freeze in mid-air, as if he actually expected it to. Sometime while the alcohol was swelling his brain, he had forgotten

that he'd taken off his sidearm. He had left it in the truck before he started drinking. He didn't feel like he needed it on that night. The other guys had their weapons with them. If their camp happened to be invaded by a snake or coyote, there was plenty of firepower to keep them safe. He had a tendency to waste a lot of ammunition when he got pissed up, so the truck was always the best place for his sidearm. The empty beer can fell to the ground, and he yelled, "Bam-bam, you're dead, beer can. Don't ever mess with John Wilson, the fastest finger in the south."

The fake gun draw didn't fool anyone. They all knew that he had drawn because he thought his gun was in its holster, and he was too drunk to remember. They all laughed at John's antics just the same. He blew the smoke from his finger as his friends were rolling around laughing on the dirt and pine needles that made up their floor. He walked over to the cooler, took off the lid and looked down into it. He said, "Now let that be a lesson to you all. The next beer can that doesn't hold up its end of the bargain and goes empty on me is gonna get the same damn thing, is that clear?" He took a beer can out of the cooler and held it like a baton. He began to mimic the can talking. He saluted the cooler with an exaggerated motion and said, "Sir, yes sir, if we go empty, sir, you will put a finger round through us, Sir. Thereby ending all of our dreams and aspirations of being good little beer cans, Sir."

Dave was laughing too hard to say anything. He had tears rolling down his cheeks. He picked

himself up off the ground by leaning on the log that John had been sitting on. He half-walked and half-staggered over to the empty beer can that had fallen unmolested to the ground, and picked it up. Dave took it over to the stump that was in front of the rock wall near the camp and set the beer can on top of the stump. As he was carrying the can over to the wall, he said as well as he could through his unrelenting laughter, "Private Beer Can, you have been charged with dereliction of duty by unduly emptying yourself. You are also being charged with conduct unbecoming a beer can. My buddy Cousin John, in his inebriated state, has attempted to address this grievance with his sidearm. He had found you guilty by beer martial already, or beer court martial, whatever the hell that means. However, as is natural with buddy Cousin John, he was in an inebriated state. It just so happens that we all are in an inebriated state. However, buddy Cousin John forgot that he left his pistol in the truck earlier, so he wouldn't shoot his dick off when he got pissed up tonight."

Dave paused and swayed side to side, in a motion that suggested he might not be vertical long enough to finish his fun. He looked back over his shoulder toward the campfire and said, "Sorry, Anna, I shouldn't oughta be talkin' like that in front of you'ns." He turned back around toward the rock face for another moment and half-step-stumbled forward back to his original position. He turned once again toward the campfire and said, "On account of yer daddy's dick is too short even for him to shoot off." Another round of laughter

started around the fire, followed by more jibes and goose calls directed at John.

Anna's voice came from the crowd. "Daddy, are you gonna kick Dave's ass for talkin' like that around me? You know language like that makes me blush." She held her guitar up to where it covered half of her face and batted her eyelashes as she continued in fake Southern belle dialect. "I just couldn't bear to hear any such talk about my strong, handsome Daddy dearest. Defend me please, Daddy, or am I gonna have to ask Bill to defend my honor?"

John, also feigning a Southern accent, said, "Little girl, your honor is of the utmost importance to me, but alas, I am not in any shape to confront a drunk man with a gun. It would be even more unlikely for me to confront him when it's an ugly drunk man with a gun, as Dave is. I am going to have to leave the deed to your beau, because, to quote Shakespeare, 'I'll take another drink of the shine, pass me the jar, Henry.'"

Fat Henry sat his banjo on top of his knee and handed the Mason jar to John. Henry said, "What play was that from?"

John said, "Henry, the fat faggot."

Henry gave John a dejected look and a flip of the middle finger. He said, "Anna, you a-wantin' me to kick little Dave's ass for a-talkin' like that in front of you'ns?"

John said, "Now that's the best idea I've heard all night. Henry, Dave is being disrespectful to our little girl, and I like the bastard too damn much to do to a thing about it, or maybe I'm so

damn mad I'm afraid that I am going to hurt him. I can't decide which it is. Why don't you just get up and shoot him? That would save me the trouble of having to decide whether I like him, or I'm mad at him."

Anna said, "Now, boys, think about it this way. Dave is being disrespectful for talkin' about Daddy's short dick in front of me. We all agree that's not right. The God's honest truth is that Momma has told me ever since I was a little girl what a short-dick bastard Daddy is. I heard her calling the newspaper in town once, to try and get them to run a story on Daddy because she thought he was the worst short-dick bastard that anyone had ever known. The newspaper wasn't interested in doing the story, even if Daddy was a short-dick bastard. They told Momma it was because the editor of the paper was the worst short-dick bastard that ever lived, and doing a story on anyone else would hurt the editor's precious little feelings." Everyone around the campfire chattered that yes, they agreed John was a short-dicked bastard and they all knew that. No one in the circle was really sure if it was true about the editor. They were shaking their heads yes, and talking in tones like they were at a Democratic Party rally, agreeing with whatever the speaker was saying.

Anna continued, "Since Dave was just talking the gospel truth, then really he wasn't being disrespectful." She stood up and handed her guitar to Fat Henry, asking him to hold it for a minute. Walking over to where Dave was standing, she said, "We can't be a'pickin on Dave for telling the

gospel truth. Daddy has always taught me that the truth is the most important thing you own. He said the truth will never lead you wrong. Everyone here knows how religious Daddy is about the truth, right, Daddy?" She pulled her gun from its holster, and from forty feet away placed three rounds in the emblem of the lady sitting on the moon on the Miller can, before it fell from the stump.

"Besides, Dave hain't sung Guitar Man for me yet tonight and I would hate for him to be a-whining and a-crying when he was singing," Anna said.

John walked over and picked up the Miller beer can and looked at the holes inside the crescent moon. He said, "Anna, the light of my life, you have learned well. The truth is the most important thing that you own. Look, Anna," John said while pointing at the can, "that's damn good grouping."

Anna replied, "Daddy, I learned that you believe the truth is the most important thing that you own. I didn't learn that it was the most important that I owned." She overly emphasized owned. "I was aiming for the tips of the crescent, so it hain't all that good, but the only light is from the fire and I had a glare from Big Bill's bald head."

They all laughed at the jab toward Big Bill. Big Bill said, "Don't blame yer errants on me, young lady. If anything was a-throwin' you off, it weren't me. Hit was likely cause you'ns were thinkin' about my boy instead of concentratin' on

shootin'. I reckon he's gone soft in the head too, ever since you'ns started courtin'."

"Courtin'?" Anna sounded shocked. "Bill, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't even know how to court, and if Bill does, he'd better be letting me know. If he knows how to court, I am going to have to quit him so I can find someone who is from this century...or the last one. Bill," Anna yelled down toward the Cumberland River where Bill and Sherman were sitting on the bank smoking a joint, "are we courtin'? You had better be thinkin' real hard before you answer that one."

Little Bill called back, "What's that, Sugar? I cain't hardly make out what you're saying over the sound of the river."

They all laughed again at the safe response from Bill. John called to Bill, "You ain't as stupid as I thought you was, boy. There might be a little hope for you yet. Don't get me wrong, though, I still don't want you sniffing around Anna, and I am more likely to put a bullet in you than favor you."

Fat Henry added, "Bill, there are a half a dozen men around this here fire that would just soon as kill you as look you if'n you was ever to do anything against Anna. I'm sure you'ns are mostly aware of it, too. However, if I was a young man in yer situation, I would be a-carrying my hat in my hand anytime I came a courtin' on account of if you'ns were to take a look at the way she can shoot, you'ns might learn that if you were to cross her, she'd more likely kill you'ns than any of us would. Hell, I'm skeered of her, and the worst I

ever done to her was change her diaper when hit was full of shit.”

Anna placed her hand on her holster. Her body was silhouetted against the fire so all that could be seen was her outline. The long frame, shapely hips, cowboy hat and hand on the holster made the silhouette. Any artist would love to have the image to put onto canvas, clay or stone. Anna was beyond beautiful, and the silhouette of her against the fire was black velvet heaven. She said to Henry, “I still haven’t forgiven you for that either, Henry. I was fond of that shit in my diapers, and I don’t recall ever asking you to change anything.”

“Now I am a-skeert,” Henry said, “What can I be doin’ to make it up to you?”

Anna swayed slowly over toward the cooler, and as she did she said, “Well, if you really want to make it up to me...” She reached down into the cooler and pulled a beer out of the ice, in synchronization with the sound of ripping aluminum and swishing suds, and said, “Pick up the banjo and play something.” Anna’s fake Southern belle accent had returned to her normal sweet Appalachian drawl.

Picking up the banjo off his knee, Fat Henry said, “I ain’t never hear’d anyone say Henry didn’t know when to shut up and do what he was a-told to be a-doing.” Henry picked off a round on banjo and yelled out in as loud a voice as he could muster in the key of D.

Dave and Big Bill joined in with their guitars. John sat and listened. This was good. He couldn’t

imagine there being any better times possible. John never had friends before he got out of the Army and moved to Kentucky. That was twenty years ago. He hadn't realized that he didn't have friends until he came here and started to make some. He had known people before, but had never had the ability to get close to them. He was sad for the boy and the young man that had inhabited his skin in his younger years. They missed out on a lot by being alone. Those younger men that he had been would have given anything to have a friend, but they didn't know. All they knew was alone.

Anna picked up her guitar and joined in the song that Fat Henry was playing in mid-verse. She began singing the vocals. It was an old bluegrass number called *Fox on the Run*. John didn't think that his heart could swell any larger as he listened to his daughter sing. Not only was she the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, she was also great at everything she did. She took to music like grapes to wine. She was the best on the team at any sport she played in high school. She was brilliant, too. There were times when Anna thought so fast, it took him several minutes to catch up to what she was saying. As she got older, he found that he was more and more often behind her thinking. He remembered back to the time Anna was seven and he taught her how to play chess. After one week, Anna was criticizing his moves. Now here she was as a grown women, drinking beer and playing music with all of the guys.

These guys weren't slouches, either, when it came to playing music. Anna not only kept up with them, but she could stay ahead. Big Bill spent more than ten years in Nashville. He wrote three Billboard top one hundred hits. He had played with Merle Haggard's band for a couple years back in the seventies. He could bring tears to the eyes of every girl in a room, or make old women dance.

Dave had gone down to Jacksonville and ended up doing studio work at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, in the eighties. He could have gone farther, but he got strung out on coke and ended up pissing away any chance that he had at a future in music. He said that he was made for the coal mines and was never happy in Alabama anyway. They all knew that was not true. Dave would have given as much as any of them would to have made his music into something that would last forever.

Fat Henry came closer to making his music great than any of them had. He was on the fast track, until one day he was having lunch with Paul Kallinger and Tom T. Hall. These days when Henry gets too drunk and tells the story, he says that he looked across the table at the two old-timers and just couldn't justify ending up a cliché like they were. He had a recording deal on the table and walked away. When he was sober, he wouldn't talk about it. None of them ever knew the true story about what happened to him in Nashville.

Henry looked and acted like one of Ned Beatty's boyfriends from the deliverance, but to

those who knew him, Henry was one the smartest and most thoughtful men in existence. When John first slowly realized Fat Henry's intelligence, he was angry at him for covering it up and wasting it. Later he grew to appreciate Henry's reasons for being the man he wanted to be, and living the life he wanted to live.

After *Fox on the Run* was finished, Henry asked John for his guitar, saying, "If you ain't gonna play that axe, then let a real man have it."

John answered, "If there was a real man around here anywhere, I would, but I don't see one." He handed the guitar to Henry anyway. Henry rarely sang, despite the constant urging of his friends. John thought that it was because Henry liked to hear his friends plead with him to sing. He would play music all night, but it was a rare time when he decided to sing. They all kept right on pleading just the same, because it was such a treat to listen to Fat Henry sing. When he sang, he sounded just like Don Williams on Williams' best day.

Henry took the guitar and played *Good Ol' Boys Like Me*. Henry knew that it was Anna's favorite song, and he would only play and sing it when she was around. When he picked out the opening Anna walked behind him and hugged his shoulders, and said, "It's about time you played for me. If you were about two years younger, I would dump Bill, and me and you would run off to an island in the Caribbean and live like natives, running naked all day."

Henry stopped playing and said slowly, “Well, damn it, girl, there hain’t no way I can play another lick now. Hell, I might not ever be able to pick up a guitar again. I believe I just had a stroke. How about gettin’ me another beer to cool me off?”

Anna said, “Anything for you, naked island buddy.” She exaggerated her hip sway as she walked in front of Henry on her way to the cooler, while Henry restarted the song from the beginning.

John picked up his guitar and played along with Fat Henry. He harmonized in an octave below on some of the chorus parts. Big Bill was sitting on the other side of the fire. He was hitting the high parts and playing along, too. John could not imagine a better sound than the one that was coming from the little campsite. Dave walked up beside John and handed him the Mason jar full of moonshine. The cousins looked at each other and smiled. The moon only a crescent tonight, but moonlight was not needed because the glow on everyone’s face was enough to light the nighttime.

JOHN WOKE UP IN the morning under the cliff that was between Dogslaughter Falls and the Cumberland River. He woke up slowly. It felt as if his head was swollen as big as a watermelon that was trying to hold on to too much water. He could feel his heartbeat as the blood/moonshine mixture surged down his arms and legs and into his fingers and toes. He attempted to open his eyes without moving his body or making a sound. He felt as if

the earth shifted underneath the sand, sending his body spinning through the air. He quickly clamped his eyes shut to end the sensation. He wasn't quite sure where he was at, or what he was doing there. He could feel the ground below him and a sleeping bag above him. He didn't feel anyone next to him, so that was somewhat of a relief. Gradually, and with more than a small amount of fear, John opened his eyes once again.

He could see the rock ledge above him. That meant that he was under the overhang. There was about twenty feet of overhang, so he could be near the river or far under the rock. He decided that he would have to move his head to find out. When he got ready to move, he would be able to see who else was under the cliff with him, if anyone. He closed his eyes again and tried to remember how he got under the rock. He remembered playing music and the friends that had been there with him. He remembered being as happy as he had ever been. At some point during the night, some girls came walking up the river to where they had their campfire. He could not remember who the girls were, that part of his memory was still soaked in moonshine. He could remember everyone yelling and carrying on when they first saw the girls walking up the Dogslaughter Creek.

He decided to open his eyes again. This time he moved his head toward the river. He could see all the way down to the Cumberland, and there was not a sign of anyone else around him. He looked over toward the Dogslaughter and could see a mass of blankets about thirty feet up the cliff wall. Since

he could not remember just exactly how the night ended, he was happy that he was not among that mess of blankets. He lifted the sleeping bag up and saw that he had all of his clothes on. That was another relief. They had set up camp the night before down near the river, so the rest of the gang would be down there. John wondered who was under the blanket down the cliff, but not so much that he wanted to go see.

His primary concern at that moment was to find his way down to camp and get either a beer or some coffee. He really didn't care which one. He just needed something to cool the dry, hot pipes that had developed overnight. If he couldn't find anything to drink at the camp, he would drink out of the Dogslaughter. He had done it before and was sure he would do it again. He knew the risks, but if there was no coffee or beer in the camp, he was willing to take them. At that moment it tasted like an opossum had shit in his mouth. He rolled from under the sleeping bag and felt the cool sand beneath him. His brain seemed to be liquid and moved a few seconds behind the rest of his body as it sloshed against the inside of his skull.

He stood up too quickly and hit his head on the cliff. The contact was hard enough that he saw stars. He was just too damned hung over to cuss, get mad, or even say ouch. He grabbed the sleeping bag and crouched down enough to walk out from under the cliff. When he was out he looked back at the lump of blankets down the cliff, he could make out two bodies, but not well enough to determine who they were. He really

didn't give a shit, but he hoped it wasn't Anna and Bill. He was sure they were sleeping together, but he didn't want them sleeping together a few feet away from him, especially if they were having sex last night. The thought of it nearly made him go over and see if it was them. The pain from bumping his head, along with the liquid gray matter soaked in moonshine that was sloshing around inside his skull, made his temper rise. If it was Anna and Bill, he might just stroke at that moment. Besides, his dry pipes convinced him to press on toward the camp.

When he approached the camp, he was relieved to see Bill fishing in the spot where the creek met the river. If that was Anna up there, at least it wasn't with Bill. He yelled out to him, "Are you catching breakfast?" The sound of his voice was enough to make him wish that he was back under the cool cliff with sleeping bag covering him.

Bill answered, "Good morning, John. Everyone else is asleep. I made coffee and didn't want to wake anyone up, so I figured I'd fish a little while. There ain't nothin' bitin', though. You'ns want to canoe up toward the falls after you'ns get your coffee down? I don't reckon any of them'ns 'll be stirrin' for a bit, and I'd be pleased to go up the river with you'ns."

John was annoyed by the early morning energy the youth exhibited and chose to semi-ignore him by replying with a grunt. A three-mile upriver canoe trip with Bill with this hangover was definitely not something that John was interested

in. He made his way down to the camp site and poured a cup of coffee. A couple of sips later, John decided that the coffee just wouldn't do and went to get a beer out of the cooler. The cooler was empty except for one Coke. John opened it and emptied the can without pausing for air. He let out a loud burp and wiped the dribble off his chin. He thought that maybe now the coffee would go down a little better.

Bill was walking toward him carrying a fishing pole and a tackle box. John asked him, "Who's up there under the cliff yet? I looked from a distance but still couldn't make out who it was. It just seemed there were two bodies under the blanket."

Bill said with more than a giggle than a laugh, "One of them is Henry. I ain't sure who the other one is. They was callin' him Phil last night, but I don't reckon that's his real name on account of everyone laughed each time someone called him Phil. They disappeared after you went to bed. They went in the same direction as you, so we was all kind of worried about you, but Anna said to leave it alone on account of you being a grown man and able to take care of yourself if a couple of lady boys thought the better of you. Not that Henry is much of lady boy, and he could probably convince anyone he was of mind to be convincin'."

John laughed at the thought of Fat Henry and some lady boy. He had known his friend was gay since the first time they met, more than twenty years ago. Fat Henry also knew that John was

straight that entire time, so the matter never came up between them. Now that John was forced to think about it, the subject made him laugh. He wondered if the girls that he foggily remembered coming down the creek last night were actually lady boys, and one of them was Fat Henry's friend. He closed his eyes and tried hard to remember, and could picture a Daisy Duke type coming into camp. She had cutoff shorts and flannel shirt tied under her boobs, just like a cliché. He was sure that at least one of the visitors wasn't Fat Henry's lady boy. John asked Bill, "Who all came up here last night? I'm not sure if I remember everything that I remember."

Bill answered, "Well, that Phil fella came down with a couple of Anna's girlfriends. You recall that? They all took off and went toward Williamsburg. Anna went with 'em, even though I weren't sure it was the best thing for her about then. They all seemed a bit lit up. Tommy is kinda sweet on that girl that lives up there on Young's Creek, and she was with them, so he panty-waisted on me and went sniffing after them. What a bastard he is. Phil decided he wanted to stay here with Henry. Of course, you should know that because you hadn't gone to bed yet."

John shook his head and agreed that he should have know that, even though that part of the night was not anywhere to be found in his memory. The moonshine that he was chasing his beer with seemed to have had an amnesic affect.

Bill continued, "After that, I don't reckon anyone else came or went. You got up and went

up the creek. You had your sleeping bag with you, so we all figured you was going to bed. Not long after, Henry and Phil said they was a-worrying about you on account of you didn't have a gun with you and there weren't no fire up there on the creek. They took off after you and they were carrying a sleeping bag too, just one between the two of them." Bill paused as he seemed to ponder the significance of the single sleeping bag and two grown men. He continued, despite not quite making the connection, "Dave hollered out after them and said it interesting that they was worried about you not having a gun when neither one of them had one, either. Neither one of them answered back, they just kept on walking. We picked a few more songs, then went to sleep here by the fire. Probably no more than an hour after you'ns went on to bed."

"Did Anna say where she was going?" John was only mildly concerned about his daughter, who was more able to take care of herself than John was.

Bill said, "No, there wasn't much open by the time they left, so they was most likely goin' to the Wendys or to someone's house. I figured if she wanted me to know, she would be tellin' me. Do you reckon that's right, John?"

"I can't hardly say when it comes to women in general, boy. All women say that they don't want a man asking after them or telling them what to do, but in reality that's exactly what they want. I can say in Anna's case. I have been wanting to talk to you about her anyway, because I am very

concerned about her future,” John paused and cocked his head to the side just slightly as he added, “and yours.”

Bill shifted uncomfortably and said, “Yes sir, I figured you might sooner or later, as we have been dating for a bit. I even asked Anna if it would be appropriate to talk to you. That was when she explained to me that you weren’t too keen on her dating me, or any other boys around here. I get your point, I really do. I mostly agree with it, too. Hell’s bells, I know she’s way too damn good for me, and I ain’t never gonna do anything that would make me worth anything to you or her, either one. That’s why I ain’t too excited about doing anything except what Anna wants done.”

“You might be a little brighter than I gave you credit for, son. I appreciate that you know that Anna had big dreams and big things coming on the horizon. The only thing anyone in Whitley County is ever gonna do is hold her back. Have you told her that you feel this way?” John asked.

Bill answered, “No, I ain’t. The first time, I told her that I loved her.” John stood up fast with a look of urgency on his face. He could feel the moonshine boil under his skin. “Now don’t get riled, John, I love her and you know that. Hell, John, everyone in Whitley County loves her. I reckon everyone that ever met her loves her. Don’t be setting in on me because I was man enough to tell her that I loved her. She set me out straight up. She had always talked to me about her plans, ever since we was little kids. When I told her that I loved her, she told that she wasn’t gonna break my

heart, but she couldn't stay around here and she couldn't take me with her. What she wants is go off to college, then come back and get married. Now I ain't slow enough that I can't figure out she ain't gonna ever come back here. Neither am I soft enough to think that she would ever marry me."

John asked, "Did you tell her that?"

"No," Bill said. "I told her that I would wait for her until she came home. I expect that after her freshman, she will be telling me to quit waiting. She will always be my greatest love and I miss her already, but I am ready to quit waiting. When she tells me to, I reckon I'll hook up with one of them wild Corbin girls and get married, have a couple kids, get divorced, do a lot of fishing, drink too much on the weekends, get a beer gut and end up a hillbilly cliché."

John studied the figure that suddenly turned from boy to young man in front of him. He said, "Where did you get these ideas from, Bill? They are good thoughts, but they seem to be a few years ahead of you."

Bill smiled largely. "I took the advice my dad gave me when I was a teenager. One day, I called you a stupid old fool. He squeezed my shoulder to the point that it nearly brought tears to my eyes. Looking at me squarely in the eyes, he told me that smartest that I could ever do in my life was to keep my mouth shut and listen to that stupid old fool anytime I was around him. Now don't get me wrong, most of what I heard from you is conservative blowhard bullshit. But the rest of it has stuck with me, more or less."

John smiled and nodded his head to the young man. “I don’t have time now, but one day I will take that canoe trip with you. I have to get to town and check my mail. I got a text message this morning that said I had a job. If... When you talk to Anna later on, tell her that I am going play tonight. I would like her to go on the job with me and spend a little time together before she goes off to college. Summer is going to go by faster than any of us want it to.”

John walked back up the Dogslaughter Creek toward the parking spot on the top of the hill, after gathering up his guitar and sleeping bag. Henry and the rest of the boys would load the coolers and the tents on the boat and take them to the landing. The coolers were all empty, so there wasn’t any weight to worry about. Big Bill and the other leftovers from the night before would probably stay there fishing until it was time to clean up and go to the gig later. The long walk through the woods out to where John left his truck was enough to clean the booze and sleep out of his system. He felt alive as he drove to town and to the post office.

BACK ON THE CREEK, Bill dreamed about Anna as he watched his bobber float up and down in white foamy water that splashed between the huge boulders that Dogslaughter Creek ambled over. He could picture in his mind the high water that angrily forced its way downstream in the spring. There was a time when he thought that he could convince Anna to stay in Whitley County and

marry him. He idealized a life of Saturday night races and babies playing in the yard. He was younger then, and foolishly thought that he could make Anna happy. He thought that he could give her enough love and have so much fun with her, four-wheeling and fishing, that she would never miss the big city schools. That was when he was younger. He was a year older and couldn't believe how stupid he had been. He was almost impressed by the thought of how stupid and wrong he was, when at the time he had believed that he was so right.

In the best part of his mind, Anna was still the little girl in pigtails that he once chased around the yard and kissed behind the barn. That wasn't the Anna that she had become. Now Anna was a woman. That woman was a smart, beautiful woman that had the entire world at her feet. She would probably stay here if he begged her enough. If he did beg, and she did stay, he would always regret being the one who dragged her down and clipped her wings.

There was movement under the cliff across the creek. Bill watched as Fat Henry sloshed his way down the hill toward the running water while pulling his shirt over hair that was standing straight up, sticking sideways and flattened down all at the same time. Bill squinted his eyes in a desperate attempt to block out the image as Henry bent down to wash his face and head in the side of the creek opposite Bill. Henry damaged Bill's psyche by exposing a butt crack partially covered by blue and red Superman underwear. He wasn't

one to disrespect his elders, so he tried his best to erase the image from his mind. He was afraid it would be burnt there for the rest of the day.

Instead of walking over the log that they had placed as a bridge across the creek, Henry stood up and waded through the water. The water came up to Henry's waist, and Bill could see the goosebumps rising on Henry's skin as he came closer. Bill thought that it was probably better to just go ahead and get wet, even in the cold water, than for the fat man to try and cross the small log and fall, and then get wet. Henry's clothes clung to him from the breast down as he walked toward Bill. Bill could see the rolls of fat jiggle.

Bill said, "Talk about what the kittens drug in. Leastway you made it through the night. Are you'ns okay?"

Fat Henry smiled at the boy, "Yer damn right I'm okay. Least fer now. If-in I weren't, you'd be knowin' about it, I'm sure."

"You aint wet, are ya?" Bill asked in a sarcastic tone.

Henry lost his perennial smile for a moment, "How about if I come over and show you if I am wet or not, ya little smartass?"

The smile was only gone from Henry's face for a second. He and Bill started laughing together. Henry said, "Are ya catching anything? If youns'd go on up yonder below the falls, youns'd likely to have a bit more luck than down here. 'Bout all yer going to get here is a little catfish or two. They's trout up the creek yonder."

Bill answered, "Yeah, yer right. I ain't really fishing, though. I ain't but mostly just wasting time until the rest of you'ns get up. I figured I'd do some real fishin' after a while, when we was on our way back toward the highway."

"Who all is yet around here?" Henry asked as he pulled a flask of moonshine out of his pocket and drank from it.

Bill reached for the flask without asking and took his own drink. It burned his mouth as it went down. He said, "Besides us and your buddy up there under the cliff, Daddy is still sleeping down by the river. John Wilson took off toward town earlier. I don't know for sure if anyone else came back down here last night, or if there ain't a straggler or two around. We was all damn well lit."

"I reckon." The fat man shook his head and looked down toward the ground.

"You ain't got a cigarette, do ya, Henry?" Bill asked.

Henry said, "I might up there under the cliff, if you want to go up and get one, but I ain't about to go back through that water. Hits damn cold this morning. Are ya out? Here, try some of this. It ain't 'baccar, but it orta do."

Henry handed Bill a cellophane bag with three fingers of pot in it. Bill took the bag from Henry and smelled it. It had a partially sweet and part musty smell. He really didn't like smoking Henry's pot, because he would be wasted for the rest of the morning. But he didn't have much planned that morning anyway, so he rolled a fat boy and smoked it with Henry.

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