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JOHN MOSS

## WEST TO EDEN

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Virgil said, "You got to keep river right over the first set of rapids, there's nothing much to them."

"River right," I affirmed. Facing downstream, keep to the right.

"Then cross over hard to river left, that's a big one. Just around the bend. The portage is clearly marked, you can't miss it."

Virgil was not thinking about high water from the late spring run-off. The first rapids, he called them Roll-Away, he described them as swifts, they were nothing more than a riffing on the surface and easy to run, even with a couple of small kids in the middle of the canoe. But in high water, their texture was smoothed to invisibility, the rocks on the bottom too far down to declare themselves to an untrained eye. Virgil knew the country so well, he could not imagine misreading the signs. The tumultuous slopes of the land, the twisting gorge, pines giving way to tenacious cedars on the battered shore, Virgil would decipher all this at a visceral level, knowing exactly where rapids would be, even when the water increased in velocity or decreased in depth so imperceptibly a stranger might not notice.

"That next one, The Devil's Cauldron, about half-way across the portage (he said 'acrost,' he said 'call-run' and 'port-age,' he spoke with a soft Canadian inflection, hardly an accent, more like northern Michigan than rural Ohio), about half-way over, there's a break along the trail off to your right, hold onto the youngsters and go take a look."

He paused, as if wondering whether to share some private revelation, and then with a zealot's flourish he declared:

"Lord thundering Jesus, it's a good one."

His voice modulated when he saw the excitement in Matt's eyes. Lucy projected an air of bemused indifference. He continued:

"Now you folks take care and we'll be seeing you (he said, 'seein' yuz'), in a couple of days at the pickup, down Paradise Lake. Don't you be late, eh."

We had driven all the way from Yellow Springs the previous day. In early June, Ohio is splendid with green, but after a long and pleasant academic winter we wanted to see something of wilderness, perhaps to remind us that life is not always so ordered and easy. Bea and I had gone to a Camp in Algonquin Park, on the North Bay side, when we were kids, the same camp but at different times. Being from the States made us slightly exotic; smug. Canadians were not sufficiently appreciative of the wild lakes that drained and the wild rivers that flowed from the rugged Shield down past their Ontario homes in the cities and towns to the south. The raw granite margins of their world were for us another world entirely.

Matthew and Lucy were old enough for an alien adventure, too young for camp on their own. We took them out of school and daycare for a few days; we

wanted to get in there after the worst of the blackflies and before the tourists.

I tracked down Virgil's outfitting establishment on the farthest edge of the Park, a hundred miles east of where Camp Obabika would be preparing for another slew of kids, eager to go Indian (where the native peoples have been virtually erased), or pining for home, at least until they had earned their new names, Big Bear, Sky Blue, Laughing Water. On the phone, Virgil assured me he could equip us completely, drop us off at Lake Divide, and pick us up at the campsite at the bottom of the run on Sunday.

We arrived late and spent the night in a small clean cabin behind Virgil's ramshackle compound and first thing in the morning he and his wife fitted us out, making sure the lifejackets for the kids were snug and impressing on them how they should stay sitting in the bottom of the canoe and be as still as the night.

According to Virgil, what made the Anishnabi River so good for a short trip was a paradox (he said, 'pair 'o ducks'). The rapids were too dangerous to shoot. There was lovely fast water to paddle, he explained, but there was also a lot of big water crashing through gorges and you had no choice but to portage around and drink in the spectacular scenery. A famous man had drowned there a few years back, a journalist with a group of experienced canoeists that included a lawyer who would one day be Prime Minister of the country. But with proper respect, the Anishnabi was safe and the awesome beauty its violence had worked on the landscape was incomparable.

Or, as Virgil's wife, who seemed to have no name, described it, "It's Jesus lovely, and it takes you all the way to Paradise."

Virgil could not anticipate that we would miss the first rapids because they were not there.

Soon after a floating lunch, when the four of us devoured peanut-butter and jam sandwiches packed by Virgil's wife, while we drifted down the centre channel that flowed through a broad marshy stretch, we approached a sweeping bend on river right. The soft shoreline gathered abruptly and rose up on either side into walls of broken rock impaled with cedars. A low rumbling rolled over us as we slid down the taut smooth surface with increasing speed. Looming shadows of boulders surging over beds of gravel flashed beneath us. Beatrice looked back to see if Matt and Lucy were secure. I slapped the gunnels with my paddle, she glanced up, I grinned. She grinned. It didn't get more real than this.

"Listen," I said. "You can hear the river."

I feathered my paddle to urge the stern away from the rocks; it seemed we were being drawn against the shore on river right, which meant Roll-Away was coming up. There was not a ripple on the fast-moving water, no sign of rapids.

Around the bend the river's breathing turned to a sudden roar and the landscape tumbled into an abyss. Ten canoe-lengths ahead the water bent, broke, spewed turbulent clouds of spray above a maelstrom of sound and fury.

Having missed Roll-Away, we were on the wrong side of the river. I tried to force us into the rocky shore, I yelled at Bea to pry right, but the power of the current which a moment before held the canoe too close now thrust us away.

"River left," I shouted.

As we swung out towards the portage sign on the far shore, the river caught us full on the beam and swirled us around. We lurched but did not capsize. We were now stern downriver, forcing against the current. With every fibre of my being bent to the paddle, I churned, Beatrice frantically thrashed at the flow, but the portage sign slipped gradually upstream.

Bea suddenly stopped paddling and twisted around. Looking past me her eyes registered holy terror. Lucy and Matt were screaming. In Bea's eyes, the flicker of a smile; her eyes gathered us together, the four of us. The canoe shuddered. The noise was deafening, it was almost like silence. The water gave way and the river opened to receive us into its furious maw.

If only I could not remember.

Plunging through air, through the shattered water, twisting over and over in the roiling depths, I somehow got hold of the kids. For a moment I dreamed everything would be alright. Beatrice's tortured body flailed above us, swirling around and around. Matt twisted towards me, his eyes wide, he could see me, the water streaked with blood between us, his eight-year-old face tormented with fear, he screamed water, his head exploded against rock. Lucy under my arm, my five-year-old feminist, her body shattered inside her skin, her life jacket holding her together, her face for a moment thrust against mine, cool and serene, and then wrenched away. Shadows and all the colours of creation contorted and eddied into absolute blackness. Then all life left me and I was rolled over and over inside the belly of the tumultuous backwash and suddenly disgorged, spewed forth gasping for breath, looking crazily around for my loved ones, losing awareness, tumbling downriver, crashing against remnants of our small expedition, clinging and bobbing, drifting, legs smashing rock, feet touching gravel, touching sand, hands on dry dead cedar, body crawling like a monstrous primeval mistake onto the shore.

"It's Virgil," said a voice. "We come up by boat lookin' for you. You been here three days on your own. We found the others."

The others: Beatrice, Matthew, Lucy.

The four of us, in Bea's final vision, together.

I was missing.

A room with blinds drawn. I knew it was Ohio.

I cannot give a precise account of the first few weeks after I regained consciousness, and before I was discharged from Antioch Hospital. My colleagues from the college were kind, while my extended family showed the range of emotion you might expect. Some graciously shared my bereavement, some expressed righteous anger, some pity, and some an odd sort of resentment or fear, as if their own mortality had been compromised. As for me, I could only focus on the vacuum within that seemed vast beyond comprehension. My emptiness was the size of the universe, my despair so horrific it seemed without limit. And yet I also

felt immeasurably small, the entire world reduced to a single black hole into which everything had collapsed, from which nothing would ever return.

At first, I clung to the darkness.

"Protestant or Catholic?" asked a voice in the gloom.

"Neither."

"He spoke," said another voice. "That's the first word he's uttered."

"He must be a Mormon," said the first voice, leaning closer.

I opened my eyes.

"He opened his eyes," said the nurse. "Thank you, Father Blazon."

"Not me, my child. Thank God."

Where was your God when the earth opened and the waters consumed us?

"You will be alright, my son." He was now gazing deep into my eyes. "God does not visit upon us more than we can endure."

Tell my children, tell my wife.

"Your wife and children are with the Lord."

They would prefer to be here.

"God in his mercy has spared his son (he meant me), perhaps for some great purpose."

Some greater sacrifice? If God can intervene to spare a man so ordinary as myself, then he must be active in the deaths of the innocent.

"It is not for us to know the ways of the Lord. I will pray."

Did your God create us so ignorant, is he so wounded by something we've done? We cannot travel west to Eden, except to be swallowed up by the failure of his creation.

"Hail Mary, full of Grace ..."

Where was the fruit of thy womb when the earth opened and the waters consumed us?

"Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death ..."

For Lucy? For Matthew? My poor little sinners. For Beatrice? Your God, Father Blazon, is merciless and vindictive, or inept beyond measure.

"Hallowed be thy name ..."

Saintly Teresa, despite God's desertion, dismissed starvation of babies on the streets of Calcutta as the reaping of souls to hallow the name of your Lord.

"Forgive us our sins ..."

Thou art obsessed with sin.

"Lead us not into temptation ..."

Isn't that the work of the Devil?

"... for thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory ..."

There is no glory in the grinding of children to their miserable deaths, to snapping my wife's bones in the torrent. And if the power is thine, Oh Lord, thou art beyond redemption.

"Amen."

"He's closed his eyes," said the nurse.

"I think maybe that helped," said Father Blazon.

It did, I thought, with my eyes tightly closed, as I stared the God of my Catholic ancestors and my Presbyterian childhood square in the face. Staring, until he, the Lord God Almighty, blinked, and turned away.

I felt a desperate need to resist Father Blazon's fey revelations of an inscrutable God, but I was also desperate to resist the balm of oblivion. If Heaven is the eternal silence of infinite spaces, I wanted the clamour of life; if Hell is an endless awareness of absence, I wanted the excoriating touch of my nerves, no matter how painful. My wife and my children spread picnics out on the grass in our garden, always setting a place for me, a paper plate and plastic cutlery arranged precisely so that if I turned up there would be nothing unsettling about joining their fun; Beatrice sometimes watched television with them, and on popcorn breaks they would step carefully over the place where I would have been sprawled out on the Persian carpet; some evenings she worked with them, constructing homework projects at the harvest table that I had built using antique floorboards retrieved from a demolition site; she would listen to Matt's times-tables, and identify dinosaurs and constellations in books so Lucy could commit them to memory; some mornings, the kids would shout outside the bathroom, commanding me to finish so they could get ready for school, and their mother, ready for work at Antioch College, where she teaches cultural theory.

"Look, his eyes are open," someone would say.

"Merciful God."

And somewhere else: "Daddy, why did you leave us? Darling we miss you."

"He's coming around. Can you hear us, Mr. Mason?"

"Dr. Mason, he's a professor."

"He's young for a professor."

"Not really."

And from a great distance: the words of my wife, the laughter of children. The words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the words of Psalm 22.

"And can you tell me the words of those Psalms?" Whose voice?

"My God, My God, Why has thou forsaken me?" I said. "That's Psalm 22; and also the words of Christ's roaring from the cross, Matthew 27:46; and after his resurrection a multitude of the undead were raised up and walked through the streets of the city."

"And the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm?"

"Everyone knows the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm."

"Not everyone."

In six weeks, I was declared recovered. As if you can recover from death. The people who cared for me were considerate beyond measure; even nurse Ratchet forced an occasional smile. By the time I resigned myself to full consciousness, Father Blazon had stopped coming. I asked for him but a doctor pointed out that I was not

a registered Catholic. She seemed surprised I would remember the old gentleman's kindness. Apparently two Mormon missionaries had also called in and sought permission to register my dead for post-mortem baptism in Utah. They were told to come back after the funeral. Since in my personnel records from Antioch College I had declared myself a 'Recovering Presbyterian,' the night nurse they accosted expressed doubt about my desire to enter my beloved into the registry of latter-day saints.

Friends, relatives, colleagues came and went. I practiced stoic responses. But, but, I shrieked inside, it is not my suffering that matters, it is the eternal absurdity of death. My children, my wife, annihilated from the face of the Earth, that is what matters.

Turning down offers, I went home by taxi. Everything on the verandah was in its place: the porch swing, the inherited Adirondacks chairs, what they call Muskoka chairs at Camp Obabika, one with a broken arm, the blue play table with two small benches, the table set with tiny cups and saucers for four. The wisteria flourishing on the trellis cast more shadow this late in the summer.

When I pulled the door shut, I was swallowed up by the hollowness inside me. Torn between bitterness and sorrow, I rummaged through the house the whole night long, opening and closing every door, checking cupboards and drawers, shifting furniture, rolling back carpets, shaking out linen, spilling books and clothing and toys across floors, desperate to find some impossible remnant of our lives that would twist time around and bring them back. The dead were everywhere around me and I could not connect.

It was not God's fault: God had been vague in my life since my teens, an apparition who took human form on Christmas Eve, when I would go to bed early so I could listen to Handel's *Messiah* drift up the snow-covered street from St. John's Episcopal Church near my parent's house in Toledo, and took human form in horrific images of Good Friday, and sometimes at baptisms and Christenings in the faces of infants, and at weddings, at funerals. Otherwise, God was little more than a rumour, although my Mom and Dad would certainly have called themselves Christian. It was not his fault, not the cranky old man with the beard or his swaggering son, or that indefinable third, all rolled into one by holy decree.

I found a five gallon container in the garage filled with gasoline for the lawn mower. (Beatrice had wanted to go canoeing in the wilderness.) I retrieved vise-grips from the basement to get the top off. (Matt was excited about sleeping in a tent and cooking meals over a fire and listening to wolves. Lucy marvelled at being in a foreign country and kept telling us in the car how different everything looked in Canada.) I emptied the gasoline over the living room furniture. I could not think where Bea kept the matches. (It was me, I missed the hidden rapids.) I found matches in the kitchen string drawer, buried under a nest of elastic bands, surrounded by half-used packages of birthday candles.

I placed their ashes in a common urn and buried it in a family plot in

Pennsylvania, a beautiful Mennonite cemetery in Lancaster County. Way back when, some of my people were Mennonites. Some went to Canada. During the Civil War the cemetery was a battlefield. Under the rattle of the Gatling guns my pacifist ancestors flinched in their graves while blood leached through from above; and the grass there grows a rich emerald green. Beatrice loved irony.

Seated resolutely on my front stoop, while the flames leapt over my shoulders and smoke billowed into the sky, I listened to sirens wail out their lament through the crackling air and I spurned the outstretched arms of my neighbours. In striking a single match and tossing it onto the gasoline-soaked Persian rug, I had declared war on the God of my childhood, the God of Heaven and Hell, of Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed, and the rest who presume to animate his failed experiment. I was determined I would turn from grief, bitterness, and rage, I would confront him, face to face, heart to heart, and match his existence against my own, my suffering with his. As sparks became embedded in my clothing and scorched my hair, and flames seared my flesh, and clouds of smoke swirled down to engulf me, firefighters hauled me from the inferno's embrace. In the open air, I struggled against the treachery of unconsciousness, and silently acknowledged my war to be under way.

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KATE HEARTFIELD

**BLEACH**

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In Belizean Creole, to "bleach" means to "stay up all night." Teenage girls braiding their hair before the summer festival, where the punta drumming and dancing goes on in tents all night long, say to each other: "*Uno wa bleach tonight?*"

This is one of the things I think about on the nights you don't come home. I remember the time I was in Belize, when I was your age, another too-smart Canadian girl. That's one of the memories I use to keep my mind away from twisted metal in ditches, from rough fingers in panties, from little pills in your little hand. To you, it's breaking curfew. To me, it's standing in the kitchen, in this obscene, artificial light.

I make another cup of pale herbal tea. I think about the word *bleach*.

To stay awake is to bleach the night. To make the darkness pale. To make it something you might not recognize.

Often I think next of the big bottle of Clorox under the kitchen sink. The pale yellow liquid, almost masquerading as water, were it not for the smell like death, the smell that burns and roughens my nostrils.

I think about how bleach spilled on a black t-shirt will turn the fabric purple. As if the t-shirt were wearing its black as a disguise all along. Like the time I wore my Bob Dylan t-shirt to clean the bathroom and it ended up with purple splotches.

Then I remember the time my sister, your aunt, bleached her jeans in our bathroom sink when she was your age. She always used to bleach her jeans. But one time she did it wrong. She got lazy. She filled the sink with water, dunked the jeans inside, then splashed the bleach on top. The bleach hit the jeans directly and made white splotches. That was an eighty-dollar pair of Levis, ruined. Your grandma was furious.

I don't think teenage girls bleach their jeans anymore. I've never seen you do it, anyway. I've never seen you take a pair of scissors and make an uneven pair of shorts out of a perfectly good pair of jeans, and carefully fray the cut. I've never seen you take the dull side of the scissors and wear a hole in the knees, leaving a few white threads that will make red lines on your knee when you wear them. I have never seen you do that.

Now the jeans are sold already damaged. They have fake dirty patches, pre-made holes, fringes, and frays. The clothing manufacturers have finally anticipated every nasty thing a teenage girl wants to do to her jeans, and done it for her. I used to draw on my sneakers, too. I can still feel the slide of the pen on the rubber, the slip of the ink into the canvas. I've never seen you draw on your shoes. The ways you mark your presence in the world are different from the ways I marked mine.

I am writing all this down because I am afraid. I don't know what you are. And that scares me more than not knowing where you are.