

THE ICE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

You get up I'll kill you, our father says.

Uncle Trash crawls on all fours across our yard out to the road.

Goodbye, Uncle Trash, I say.

Goodbye, men! Uncle Trash says. Don't y'all burn the house down! he says, and I say, We won't.

During the knocking-down nobody notices our mother. (She is a flat-footed running rustle through the corn all burned up by the summer sun.)

Carson's side note

HER FAVORITE STORY

By Mark Richard

IN INDIAN, this place is called Where Lightning Takes Tall Walks. I figure that to be about right. What happens here is this is the first landfall those water-heavy thunderheads make when they quick-boil up from across the bay. Long-legged stretches of bone-white light come kicking through the treetops of the tallest shortleaf pines, ripping limbs and splitting crowns. When they leave past, your ears are ringing from the thundershots and there is the smell about of electric-seared sap. It is a heart-racer to have happen around you in the day, and at night you still have coming to you the cracking hiss and branching swish in the whole dark of crowns falling so heavy unseen and so close

they push air past your face and the ground bounces you up on your toes.

What I am out here doing in this place where lightning takes tall walks has to do with what happened with me and Margaret when we lived a cable length upriver. My cabin is actually three bends and a cutback along the shore from here and I imagine by now it is run over with raccoons and field mice and black snakes coming in for to eat them. I don't imagine anybody has run off with anything in it, seeing how the rut down to where my cabin is is generally under a flood tide and mostly washed out up along the last three miles it runs out to the county road. I swam by one day recently and it seems to be all right, allowing for the tree trunk stuck in the roof and excepting for one of the all-glass front windows that is busted out, probably shot that way from somebody in a boat. The big-headed dog I brought home for Margaret wasn't around, me reckoning now he has run off back to town.

Town is where he came from that I got him, from one of those big turnaround truck drivers who used a softball bat on the animal, saying the dog was mean. The big-headed dog wasn't mean, though he was wall-eyed, and wall-eyed isn't something you want to see on a dog—meaning they're not too bright, not good for tracking or running a trace. That turnaround truck driver got drunk in town—it was a Friday—and beat that big-headed dog with the softball bat until he bled from his

ears and tail and then threw the dog off the end of Rusty Shackelford's dock. Lucky for the dog it was near low tide so he could lay passed out in half a hand of water without drowning. I had no carry with the turnaround driver with the softball bat, but the dog wasn't dead at all and it was to have a hard death in the water, cold from a four-day freeze, so I laid the old beat-up mutt on a pound net I had in the bottom of my metal flake canoe and paddled us on home.

Home, I pulled open down the oven door, laying the dog on it under broil to warm him up and dry him out, and what but if the first thing he didn't do, coming around awake, was to try to take off my damn arm at the shoulder, chasing me around my own house, me finally up on the picnic table I had in my living room and him yapping and snappy, barking below with steam coming off his coat from the oven broil like he was some sort of demon dog from hell.

What it was I never knew Margaret had that settled that big-headed dog, wild as he was, him snockering around her like a puppy, not letting me raise my voice at her lest I get a growl from where he used to sleep most of the time by the alpine hearth. It was just the way she was, the way she had with people, men and dogs alike. She wasn't beautiful and it didn't matter, them even in town not saying she was beautiful, though I could tell, by the way Rusty Shackelford and Danny Daniels Shackelford and Scoop looked down her shirt

sideways under her arms, seeing she had an all-over tan at least up top, I could tell that drove them in town wild. What I call town when I say town really being just Rusty Shackelford's seafood house at the end of a half-fell-down dock with two pumps, a diesel and a gas. Town being where Rusty had a hoist for packing out the local high-rise rigs, a concrete-crate shed, and a motel machine for ice, him having between where it is safe to get good last footing before falling through the rotten planks and the crushed-shell turnaround, a desk he calls his office, a one-room five-sided store, and a shoebox near where the cat named Fishhead sleeps in the window, a place where if ever you were to get any mail in this world you would find it there, most likely already opened up and read out loud to everybody by Rusty, drinking on Friday nights in what this place is I call town.

It is in town where, before Margaret, I could get my fill of human life, coming in with a fair wind and following the tide down river, paddling my metal flake canoe to get grub in the five-sided store and take on any nets needing mends.

Rusty's half-cousin Earl Shackelford Hayes being my best customer, seeing how he's always ripping up all his rigs running spot and trout off Stumpy Point, everybody knowing how poor the bottom is there, Rusty saying to him, Why do you think they call it *Stumpy* Point? and then saying to us, Earl's but *half*-cousin, half, half,

only just a *half*. Winters, after making groceries and gathering net for work, I'd help in the concrete-crate shed packing boxes of fish, and summers I'd shovel ice, always on Fridays stopping at dark for a drink. Danny Daniels and Scoop would liquor up enough to beat hell out of each other in the crushed-shell turnaround if there weren't any truck drivers to fight with, me putting in with them together when there were. I could make a day and a night of going into this place I call town doing the business and then the get-together fight waiting for the first after-dark tide to turn. So this was town when I say I sometimes later brought Margaret, not so beautiful but driving the rough men wild with her all-over tan, them helping her out of the canoe when we came gliding up like she was an Indian princess, leaving me to tote and carry three loads of mended pound net to the five-sided store all by myself, her having the way she had on the rough men at the dock in town.

The way she had on me, Rusty Shackelford said, was a clean shirt and a combed head. I figure that to be about right, that being what of me he could see away from my cut-off-from-the-world cabin. Cut off from so far away from the world I used to walk the clay-bank shoreline naked with a smear of good mud pulled across my shoulders and over my privates against the sun, an osprey feather tucked behind my ear for chiggers and ticks, that being how me and Margaret first met, her digging relics for the state, her figuring where I lived

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to be where Indians kept a summer camp long ago, her having to walk about forty lengths of bad shoreline at low tide to get to where she could fill plastic bags and pockets full of the pottery pieces and pipe stems I already have so many of I just step on to break. She said her particular interest in Indians took her aback when she looked up and saw me mud-naked and feather-headed forty lengths from a highway and me being without a girlfriend since a season six or eight back, what I can say is that my particular interest in her showed itself with a growth, breaking little mud flakes crumbling to my toes, one of the ways Margaret always had on me when I looked at her.

What else that Rusty Shackelford didn't know about her having a way on me was how, after I started getting her to stay over from where she dug relics for the state, she started to clean the outdoor things from the front room of my cabin. First out to go were a stack of busted crab pots, some sawhorses holding up the keel of a skiff I'd been thinking about building for three years, four barrels of scrap and trash, a load of termite wood to burn in the alpine hearth, and half a load of washed-up two-by-fours for a someday front porch. She even got me to put all my power saws and axes in the shed, her not knowing how I love to saw and cut up things indoors. What was left was the picnic table to dance on when we drank and listened to Latin records, also my favorite old stuffed chair, and my upright rigs so

HER FAVORITE STORY

I could string and mend net throughout the house, her putting screens back up on the windows so flying-through-the-house birds wouldn't foul in the strung-up netting and cripple themselves. We even cleaned out the old alpine hearth so on those afternoons when the flood tide was up in the windward yard and it was raining hammers and nails and a hundred dozen seagulls were softballing in the leeward lawn, we could stretch out on a quilt in front of a fire and drink hot wine and play Monopoly naked with the big-headed dog snoring nearby. This is what Rusty Shackelford could not have been knowing about, how in this cut-off-from-the-world home Margaret was making my life even more than a clean shirt and combed head can say.

In the summer, the secret of her all-over tan was us paddling halfway over the Stingray Point in my metal flake canoe, me putting out the little Danforth anchor I'd found in back of Rusty Shackelford's concrete-crate shed, us naked drinking cold beer laying in the bottom of the canoe, legs crossed over legs and over the side, me telling her the Indian stories I knew, like where lightning takes tall walks and how Stingray Point got its name. That one being her favorite story I used to tell again and again, about Captain John Smith up from Jamestown stinging himself on a stingray, a good story about him spearing fish with his sword and getting stung, his arm swole up and his tongue stuck out, about how they thought he would die so they went ashore out

of their boats and dug the grave but instead Smith got drunk off the surgeon's rum and ate the stingray and lived, and they all sailed away, leaving a big empty hole in the ground for the Indians to come out from the woods to look down into, trying to figure out what for and probably not being able to. This stingray story being Margaret's favorite, I used to tell her over and over, her listening, soft-sucking on a beer bottle and playing with my privates with her big, all-over-tanned, naked toe.

In the winter, I used to have to take a butane torch out back to the well house to defreeze the water pump, being careful not to heat up the rocks in the floor to wake the snakes hibernating underneath, this even after, in the sleet and fog somewhere between the cabin and the well house, stumbling through a flock of snow geese on their way south resting in my leeward lawn, their necks as big as your arm, wing muscles strong and hard from their Canada-to-Cuba flight, so big and strong to knock you down if you were to stumble through them, flushing them up unawares which I usually was, so early in the morning fog going out to defreeze the pump.

In that winter Margaret stayed over, she showed how if you patched a light bulb to the electric pump to burn, it would keep the air from freezing while leaving the snakes alone, and then she took Christmas gift pictures of the snow geese eating the corn she had laid out for them, and in the morning with coffee she'd cook up

fried eggs and ham from Rusty Shackelford's five-sided store instead of just the candy bar or peanut-butter sandwich I was used to, and this after taking a hot shower together with plenty of hot water pumping up from the well house, me soaping Margaret's back, wondering why hadn't I thought of the light bulb trick before.

That coming spring, a mama raccoon had babies in the woodpile, so getting a fire meant dealing with her trying to tear you up, not even being afraid of the big-headed dog Margaret had fed to full grown by then. Getting a piece or two of wood to burn in the alpine hearth was like playing a big set of pick-up sticks, not wanting to move or bother the whole pile lest the mama coon'd come tearing out hissing and chasing me and the big-headed dog back inside the house. This was something Margaret liked to watch, sometimes taking pictures and sometimes pretending to look us out with the pissed-off mama coon coming at us on our heels. I stopped getting anything altogether off the pile, settling on burning driftwood, which was a ache and a pain to gather. But the sand in it burned the flames in the fire green and were pretty for us to look at, stretched out naked on the quilt late at night. It came spring soon anyway and we didn't need the fires, and mama coon and what we called the coonettes started coming up on the steps to look in the house and the way Margaret had with people pretty soon the coonettes were all over

the place eating out of the dog's bowl and then chasing his tail around the picnic table I still had in the living room for furniture. I only put my foot down the time they all ate the lime rinds we'd had left over from a batch of gin and tonics, and raving and hissing drunk they ripped open my favorite big covered chair and tore out all the stuffing. I think chasing them all out of the house with a broom and a stick hurt Margaret's feelings, and looking back on it now, I feel sorry for doing it.

That is the spring I'm come to tell about, the spring of remembering the mama coon and her babies, what I last remember. And this, the night we were hearing one of those quick-boiling thunderstorms step and kick around the place where lightning takes tall walks, us in the bed in the back bedroom with the big-headed dog sitting on the straight-backed chair to watch like he liked to do, us saying the little secret things to each other that people doing what we were doing say, then me feeling the hair on my arm bend the wrong way like in a chill breeze draft, Margaret's hair floating from her head like a Christmas tree angel's wings, still doing it but bracing and waiting, and then a stray step of the walking lightning came down through the top of the tree right by my back cabin door. It all happened so fast with the dog scrambling up on the bed and Margaret naked sliding off and the ceiling breaking open for a tree trunk like a telephone pole to come pile-driving all the way through and still on its way down into the floor.

And then it being quiet after the explosion, the tree trunk finally stopping, it smoking and smelling that blue electric smell with the burnt-up sap, me and the big-headed dog tangled on the broken bed, with Margaret having hit hard on her back near the hole in the floor stuffed with tree trunk, her long legs kicking in the air with a sexy view, an even more sexy view when I peeked over the mattress at her fully near the trunk of the tree, a sexy view that even further excited me about now being able to use a chain saw indoors.

But all wasn't just all right. When Margaret sat up she said Oh, like she had just thought of something she had forgotten, she pressed her fingers below her belly and then the lights flickered off and in the dark she said we needed to go into town for Della, Rusty's wife Della, Della who is what we have for a midwife and a cat-gut stitcher of slashed skin hereabouts. Della had delivered most nearby babies that could be gotten to, her delivering about two of her own with just Rusty's help.

All was not all right because to my eye Margaret wasn't showing that she'd had something of ours to carry, and the little quick-boil thunderhead seemed to be more of a front coming through with much of it still downriver letting lightning tall walk through trees. Even dressing in the dark, getting ready, not finding a flashlight that worked, I could tell there was lots of blood by the smell and by the way the dog was nervous. Even getting down to the canoe Margaret was feeling weak,

making it worse for her that the tide was out and I had to make two trips down to where the water was deep enough, one trip to drag down the metal flake canoe and the one trip carry her away.

Big rain like grapes hit us even before I pushed off in the dark, and the big-headed dog yelped and yowled at us from shore. The front moving in was coming at us right up the river bringing with it the turning tide and dirty chop. I couldn't see, not even Wolftrap Light, not even the number-four channel marker I used to reckon with. As I broke around and free of Stingray Point the breeze freshened harder so I figured best to hug inshore and make my crossing farther down hoping the wind would slack but it getting stronger and me figuring what was the right thing to do when I couldn't even see the bow of the canoe nor even Margaret wrapped in our fireside quilt laying quiet on pound netting in its bottom.

The rain broke harder, the canoe taking on some, waves licking the gunwales, my knees wetting, and a slosh around my ankles, me hoping the net would at least keep Margaret up a little out of it. Lightning was hitting something right regular over to south shore, and that was my only hope to see, when it lit the sky bone-white bright. I was pushing us as hard as I could with my best J-stroke but I could tell that not even did I pull my paddle out to dig for another stroke but what the

wind pushed us back. I turned even closer to shore hoping for a break but not feeling it come.

Margaret shifted a couple of times pressing what we had for her to where the bleeding wouldn't stop, and even in all of it with her getting worse she shifted herself so not to disturb any headway I was making with the canoe, her maybe not really knowing I really wasn't making any. In a bright burn of lightning I slumped for a second seeing we still hadn't completely passed Stingray Point, and Margaret, lifting her head seeing it too, asked me to go ahead and talk to her, to tell her the story about Captain John Smith, and even though I had told her it a hundred times, not in that night could I remember a word of it, any more than I could turn us through the wind, so she told it, she told it like I had never heard it before, telling each part like it was a question, like how you tell a story to a child, asking with the sound of your voice, Are you straight on that part of the story yet? And then when she finished telling it she started telling it again until I started to remember it, and then remembered it well enough to tell her, telling her it, and also remembering too what that story is all about.

I paddled all night pushing back and across, making headway until just before light I was able to make the crossing where the river is a mile wide just up from town, where Rusty Shackelford has his half-fell-down dock. The light coming up was the kind that after a

front moves through gives everything a different color in the early morning break. The water sloshing in the bottom of my metal flake canoe had several different colors of blood in it, colors that were all over me and my legs from kneeling, colors running around my wrists like vines from where the skin had wrung off my hands padding all night, colors black, dark red, and brown everywhere except in the quilt-tucked face of my Margaret, laying still on the net in the bottom of my metal flake canoe.

I don't remember much after, except seeing Danny Daniels Shackleford covering Margaret's eyes while pushing his fingers against his own, Scoop kneeling with us in the mud beside the canoe to straighten out the colored mess in his simple way but not being able to and going to fetch Della. I think I was there when the state people came and the sheriff came but I get hazy, maybe remembering fighting with someone over the fireside quilt they had unfolded Margaret from, maybe fighting with Rusty taking off my clothes with all the state people around, I think I did, and then I started walking the forty lengths of bad shoreline quilt-dragging naked to Where Lightning Takes Tall Walks, to where I've stayed just about all until today.

That must have been so many seasons I can't count ago. What they've caught a few sights of me since is mud covered in summer and quilt ragged in winter, being the haint the kids come to try to spook out at

night with their lights, me running clapping and splattering through the mud when the quick-boil storms come marching across the bay, me making to where the tallest shortleaf pines grow, to stand as straight as I can arms spread and face turned up, please begging for just one long-legged kick of bone-white light right between the eyes.

What I've come to see, though, is me laying lately in deep holes dug in the woods, just outside of Rusty Shackleford's town, and I've seen me shipping around at night to where Rusty has my metal flake canoe strapped to the rafters in the concrete-crate shed for me to get when I want, and I've seen me creeping under the back door of Rusty's five-sided store hungry to hear a human voice or two.

And lately, I see me losing a taste for raw fish and the young robbed from men's nets and animals' nests, and I see me lonesome for that big-headed dog I see sometimes sniffing at the tracks I've made at low tide, tail wagging but too wall-eyed to think to follow the scent, and me, I get to thinking about Stingray Point and the story where they dug the grave but never the man let them fill it, and I see today from my fresh hole dug in the woods near Rusty Shackleford's town that it must be Friday night with all the turnaround truck drivers drinking with Danny Daniels and Scoop, seeing how young they aren't anymore, and seeing how many turnaround truck drivers are up against them, I figure just

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as soon as that second bottle goes down and the fists come up, I figure I'll come down out of these woods swinging, putting in together with my friends, getting a fair knock of human life, taking a tall walk back into this town.