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## Wild Kingdom

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## Wild Kingdom

### Abstract

Before my brother Rick left home that spring he tried to tell me something but I couldn't hear what he was saying. This was on account of the fact he liked the noise of a Harley Roadster but could only afford a secondhand Honda Scrambler. So he removed the muffler. And what he was doing then was quitting high school to escape the musty basement room we shared in Maine for the endless coast of Florida via Rout 1. He was going with his best friend Jimmy Taylor. JT for short. Rick was Crawdad. It was 1979 and everything was brown and orange and when I think about this now I think I've figured out what Rick was telling me as he warmed up his motorcycle. What my brother said was, "Leave."

### Keywords

traveling, death, hunt, novel excerpts



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December 16, 2011

## Wild Kingdom

by Stace Budzko

*Excerpt from a novel manuscript*

LEAVE

Before my brother Rick left home that spring he tried to tell me something but I couldn't hear what he was saying. This was on account of the fact he liked the noise of a Harley Roadster but could only afford a secondhand Honda Scrambler. So he removed the muffler. And what he was doing then was quitting high school to escape the musty basement room we shared in Maine for the endless coast of Florida via Route 1. He was going with his best friend Jimmy Taylor. JT for short. Rick was Crawdad. It was 1979 and everything was brown and orange and when I think about this now I think I've figured out what Rick was telling me as he warmed up his motorcycle. What my brother said was, "Leave."

Those of us who knew Rick – that is, we who were allowed into his inner circle, understood his desire for wide-open spaces. Often he revealed how he felt snared, waiting for the trigger like the coons, minks and muskrats

he caught each trapping season in the swampland around Great Pond. This was fair enough explanation to see what stood between my brother and our parents.

Freedom. Route 77 was a straight shot out of town.

Once you leave, he'd say, don't come back, unless with good reason.

Matter-of-factly he would speak of his journeying ways. And his first taste of the road came early. At seven, he was a seasoned hitchhiker taking rides from strangers to get to school on time. At ten, he had made his way up into Canada only to be retrieved by our father when the border patrol thought he was being kidnapped by a Quebecois trucker who went by the handle Cookie. Then annually, as a teenager, he would ride his dirt bike the hundred miles to Laconia Motorcycle Week to be close to, as he called it, *the action*.

His wanderlust was legend.

With my brother there was a running desperation that provoked like-mindedness within our circle. It was infectious. Though there were times, I suspect, we faked it with an exaggerated nod; in spirit we were always right there with him.

But when it came time to actually join him, when he came up with the plan to hop a freight train for the West Coast, specifically Big Sur, none of us showed up that bright morning in the summer of '78. It seemed his conviction went just so far. And without followers he lacked purpose. It was as if growing up instilled in him the belief that the validation of experience depended upon the company of others. Unwavering, Rick returned home to work on our next adventure. He never spoke of this day again.

In many ways he was born on the go. It is our mother's claim that his first words were, "Bye-bye, baby." If you were to believe this it would seem he came out of the chute with his thumb in the air.

It was only a matter of time until he would make good on his words.

What our parents couldn't guess, and eventually what would become an

uncertainty I shared with them, was when Rick would return. But, being that he was my brother and ever faithful to his word, I estimated his trip to Florida (given several detours and maybe an odd construction job or two along the way) would fall somewhere in the vicinity of six or seven weeks. Two months, tops.

Then he would come back. And the new world would be ours.

My expectation lay in the reeds just beyond our backyard – a raft the two of us built earlier that year with the promise that we were to set sail when he pulled into the yard.

In spite of the fact that I can tell you Rick did return later that summer, I'm most certain he was not the same brother. He was different somehow, unfamiliar. The best explanation any of us can come up with is the fire went out inside.

To this day Rick's eyes remain glossed over, his voice – a flat line, and that unique something that wound his clock, all but stopped.

He has forgotten my name.

But if you asked me then how far we would get on that raft, I would have said far. And if you had said that that would never happen, I would have told you, wait and see.



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## Wild Kingdom

### THOUGHTS ON DROWNING

These are the days around the time Rick throttles away. It's April, the ice covering Great Pond has fallen below the water's surface, and at any moment we will become strangers and grow into our ordinary lives. For now, my brother, JT and I smoke homegrown grass in the basement of our house. Above us our mother does her stocking Stroll across the linoleum while our father is out hustling for Wonder Bread. Rick has made it clear in my eleven-year-old head how the buds on trees in the backyard threaten to burst atomic at any moment.

"It's a Three Mile Island out there, Hippie," he says.

He calls me this because of my long hair, which, when her tranquilizers work, our mother cuts like clockwork. My given name's Jackson. And the difference in our years, seven in total, gets washed away by the fact that I don't reveal these hours to our parents.

"Amen," I reply, pounding away on our father's well-loved bongos.

"That's right, hombre. It's all going to light up for us."

"I think I see it happening already."

JT passes me a pipe carved out of a deer's antler. Rick is sprawled on his waterbed wrapped in a raccoon blanket he stitched from pelts he trapped last fall. He looks like a tired Indian, but this is part of his philosophy. It has something to do with getting back to nature. Or maybe devouring it. He is to our tribe as our father is to our nuclear family.

I light the bowl and below my nose the orange whiskers glow.

My pulse is that of a hummingbird.

When we're done JT gets up and dribbles a tennis ball around an imaginary team of defenders across the floor to the mini fridge for another Old Milwaukee. His high top All-Stars are worn and faded and at six feet he is tall to me. With one stride he could be anywhere.

Presently, his feet cut like hockey skates across the cold cement.

Under the black bulb haze he examines the pencil sketches of our raft laid out on the pool table. Rick and I have spent winter and spring putting the finishing touches on our crude vessel. It rests in the cattails out back on Great Pond. This is to be our summer of independence.

Biting on his cigarette JT asks, "You have any thoughts on drowning, Hippie?"

I haven't yet learned how to play it cool. I admit I do. Jim Morrison sings out "Riders on the Storm" and at this hour I can hear my brother's rambling thoughts, "Don't be, little man." He sits transfixed in front of the television watching yet another rerun of *Wild Kingdom*. There on the television is a leopard low in the brush not far from a gazelle drinking from a shallow stream. A sun twice the size as the one outside our window is all that separates them. My brother, I realize, is five thousand miles away.

JT laughs. "As you should."

Not knowing what to believe, my eyes go wide.

"Dig it. My cousin Bingo found himself in a mother of a riptide when we

were on long boards last summer,” JT says, which, as with most of his stories, starts somewhere between a six-pack and a bowl. He licks the head off his tall boy. “Lucky for him, he was scooped up by some tourists in their Carolina Skiff off Prouts Neck.”

Rick, not missing a beat, then asks me what I think is going to happen to the gazelle. For some strange reason, he likes to give me these questions even though the both of us know how it’s going to play out.

It doesn’t take long. I go with the gazelle getting it, and good.

“Fair enough,” he says.

Pleased, I smile.

“Keep in mind, though,” letting out a puff of the rich, sweet smoke of his clove cigarette, “there’s someone waiting on that leopard. He’s not above prey himself.”

At these moments I discover that my brother sees things in terms of the hunter and the hunted. In his wilderness there is possibility. Maybe because he is this way or maybe because he is my older brother, I choose to stick close by. Well-armed, he carries a folding knife to school in his toolbox. He is the most prepared grease monkey in auto shop.

Sliding out of his covering, Rick declares we are off to our raft. In turn, JT says he’s leaving for a pick-up game of Horse. My brother puts on an army jacket his girl Chloe gave him. She’s crayoned a heart above the nametag with their initials inside. He has me prop open the window for the two of us to get back in later. But it’s not as if my brother has to tell me what to do. Afternoons are spent like this.



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## Wild Kingdom

### LIBERTAS

Stoned under the sun we make our way to Great Pond through the backyard. I find myself saying *Wow* at unlikely moments. Here on the trail all is beautiful. A thin canopy of evergreen gives way to rotted stumps, wetland grass, bramble, cattail. As we quickstep on fallen logs over Alewife Brook toward the shoreline, sky is a chalky blue. As we sink deeper into the thawing mud, I feel settled.

Rick lets me in on our future plans.

The new tribe is to be self-sufficient, native. He says it might be difficult at first but this is to be expected. We'll adapt. And soon others will join us: friends and lovers, welcomed guests. Dinner will be at the end of a fishing line and with trigger clicks. Only the hunters will survive. He says when the heavy stuff goes down, be ready.

"Of course we'll seek the welcoming bosom of friendly shores."

"Of course," I say.

Over his shoulder Rick then asks if I will be bringing a girlfriend.

Trying to find my balance, I shrug.

“Don’t worry if you don’t have one in mind,” he says. “You will. But this is the point. We need to adopt our own language.”

“Like Eskimos,” I say.

He nods. “Indeed. Like Eskimos.”

He goes on to say how we’ll communicate using only our eyes. This, along with hand signals, finger whistles, hoots.

“We’ll have a hundred words for kill.”

“Solid,” he says.

For most of the trail Rick is in front me. He carries our essentials: tackle box, gas torch, beer and cigarettes. From behind I jump to catch his second hand clove smoke in my mouth in an attempt for higher flight, which, when we come up to a frog hopping over a tree root, is never to be discounted.

“You know there are these frogs in the Amazon that can fly?” Rick says, at eye level with the slick amphibian. “They have these webbed hands and feet and can turn in midair...like a boomerang.”

“Whoa,” I say.

“That’s right. Fly. They are the future, Hippie.”

“What about this one?”

Rick fast-grabs the frog, buries it in my coat pocket. “He’s flying with us.”

I have my arms out wide and make like a fighter plane.

Now carrying a bit of our new life, I march steady toward the white sun.

We arrive at the water’s edge. Not far behind us, the old homestead.

Standing before our raft I believe anything is possible. I can see the smallest detail. A penny nail is raised on the sloped, tin roof. The hole we bored in the rough floor to drop our fishing lines is 18" in diameter. Wooden benches made from granary lumber seat eight comfortably. But there are some things I refuse to see, or admit. Like, the oil drums that keep us afloat are rusting along the thin seams. They are fastened to the hull in frayed square knots. This hull has rot and it creeps ever so. And because Rick is a night crawler, the twin floodlights that hang over the bow will drain our used car battery in less than twenty hours time. All is wonderful, and nothing is scary.

Rick and I jump onboard.

The craft lurches underfoot, the wet boards creak against metal drums.

We are joined by purpose – our first trial run. He assumes port and I am starboard holding onto a long pole made out of pine and notched in meters to gauge water depth. The two of us push off and snake out into Great Pond. My brother is patient, righting us when we are off course. As the watermark on our poles grows taller, our house recedes in the distance.

"So far, so good," he says.

I do everything to keep up, grunting as I try to keep us in sync.

"Nice. Way to work it. You're practically seaworthy."

His words hang on my image of him like his favorite shirt. I am good-feeling.

Beyond the horseshoe of reeds we drop anchor and settle into our beers. Three hundred yards from shore everything smells like our basement, but little else matters. Canadian geese fly low overhead mocking us as Rick blasts them with a steady finger and a determined thumb. Under the imagined feathery fallout, I skip bottle caps across the brown silt water. We are as everyday as a Norman Rockwell.

Rick informs me we are floating over a junkyard.

"It's a parking lot below," he says. Although we can't see any of the cars that have fallen through the winter ice, Rick acts like we can. "Allan Still's Camaro went under Christmas Eve last," he says. "Dig it, those were tremendous wheels."

Instead of weeds and muck, I am thinking of the rusted clunkers below.

He then head-motions toward the eddy to point where a hydroplane crashed two summers ago. And this gets to me. At the end of the summer when the water table is low the tip of the wing peaks out just enough. That serial number remains forever burned in my brain.

"No need to let that scare you," he says. "That air jockey wasn't native."

We change the talk and try to come up with a name for our craft, dickering back and forth. I suggest the *HMS Airship*. Crawdad says that's a mighty tag but convinces me how *Libertas* makes you think about mythology and important ancient gods and isn't that an inspiring thought.

Satisfied, he then has me step up on the tackle box.

Butane torch in hand, I attempt to inscribe *Libertas* above the cabin door while my brother holds me from behind at the waist. As he does, he calls out each letter.

"Light it up," he says. "Feel it."

"I am."

"No, man," Crawdad says, tapping my chest. "Close your eyes. Let it happen."

To counter the pitch of the raft, I spread my feet wide.

"You need to feel it. Do you really feel it?"

"I guess," I say.

"Don't over think it. It's you and the torch. You're Hippie, god of fire."

I do what he says – faithful that anything from here on in is our river to the sea. Eyes closed, I begin to imagine pirate ships and whalers. Foreign ports. I am picturing us done up in war paint when I smell the singed hairs on my arm.

Rick encourages me as I go.

“What’s the next letter?”

He doesn’t say anything.

“Come on. I’m ready.”

Eventually, he lifts me off the box by my arms. “Check it out.”

We stand, back to bow, looking at our guaranteed fate charred into the craft. *Libertas* calls to us in black, block letters. Underneath this, my brother has carved our new names.

“Hippie,” he says. “Our work is done.”

Page 3 of 5   « Previous   1   2   3   4   5   Next »

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« Previous Post  
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ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

## Wild Kingdom

MISS GODFREY

In geometry class, when Miss Godfrey has us students go one by one to the front of the room and draw triangles on the chalkboard, her guiding voice reminds me of the *Peanuts* gang. The way that teacher wonk wonks at Charlie Brown is what I hear as she covers the end of day materials.

Still, she's getting to be okay in my book.

Rick has a take as well. He calls her a *magnificent love star*.

I'm not sure if he's confusing our class with astronomy.

But seeing that geometry just so happens to be the last subject, my brother has made a routine of now personally coming to the room to take me home on the back of his motorcycle. And he's always on time.

When the final bell rings the two of them walk me outside. No sooner are we in the fresh air and they're talking over a Marlboro Light about their favorite music, the latest movies, and how us kids appear so wise, so dangerous.

I sometimes pretend they're my parents.

Miss Godfrey, being new and younger than the other instructors, is the gossip of the school. Everything about her is foreign, right down to her clothes, which strike me as different, in all the cool ways. She told the class once she grew up in Germany and Japan and a few places we needed a globe to find. That's as much as she's said about her childhood.

These days, Miss Godfrey is mostly what I dream about.

As she has me approach the chalkboard the great event of the afternoon has its better way with my emotions. Since first bell I have been restless and weird – tapping a pencil against the desk to whatever tunes play in my head. My knee can't stop moving either. I blurt out *the sky is falling* to no one in particular. This is followed by a collective stare.

See later on my brother plans on jumping his dirt bike over Chloe in the sandpit near our house. There's talk a reporter will be there to capture the moment but that's merely jive, according to Rick. Not to mention a bad scene. Having a newspaper reporter there would land him in the clink if word got out. Rick told me the sandpit was formed when a meteor crashed there thousands of years ago. "The sky is falling," he said to me once. "Take your chance, for tomorrow might not come. Holes like that sandpit are what took out the dinosaurs, Hippie."

His words made sense. I read about this in books.

Anyway, the idea for the jump came to be after Rick and Chloe had a two-day blowup in our basement not long ago. That's when Chloe challenged. "Prove your love to me, hot dog."

This event is what he came up with.

On the chalkboard, I begin to draw my triangle. It's unlike the others. I start by drawing a long horizontal line in the center of the board. This way I am able to tip the isosceles on its side and with my ruler build what looks clearly to me like a sweet motorcycle ramp.

Miss Godfrey offers words of approval for my innovation. When finished the task, she claps and points out that triangles can be any way you want

them. It really depends on how you want *your* geometric shapes to be.

“That’s wonderful,” she says. “Good job. Allison, you’re next.”

With my back to the class, I can hear Allison Wheeler’s chair slide across the tile floor then her quick footsteps as she walks toward me.

“You’re done, Jackson. It’s Allison’s turn. Let’s see what her vision will be.”

But like everything in these delirious hours, I am about the day’s potential.

Freehand, I draw a crude motorcycle and two even-more-crude stick people – one stands off to the side of the triangle, a ways away from the ramp. This one gets long, wild hair, and inspired by Rick’s army jacket, a love heart around her.

“Enough, Jackson,” Miss Godfrey declares. “Other students need a turn.”

I throw up a finger. “One second,” I say then chalk the other stick person next to the dirt bike. This one has an arm raised, and inspired by the promise of the day, gives a peace sign.

The class erupts in laughter, hands slap desks, textbooks fall on the floor.

John Vail, who sits in the front row and Cape Middle School’s royal snitch, breaks in. “Miss Godfrey. I know what Jackson’s drawing.”

“Not now, Jonathon,” she says.

“But Miss Godfrey.”

In my head I realize a huge problem with this picture. The sandpit walls are not the exact angle of the isosceles I have crafted. They are far more horizontal. I panic. Fearing Rick’s safety, I go for the eraser to fix everything. As I do, I latch onto Miss Godfrey’s fist.

Standing next to me, she owns the eraser.

“Us. Talk. Out in the hallway.” She takes me by the back of my elbow.

The class quiets to murmurs and giggles.

On our way, I dare Vail to tell Miss Godfrey what's planned later on.

"Take your chance, Vail, for tomorrow might not come."

His face flushes.

The neighborhood stands on the lip of the sandpit like a row of shrubs. From here in the basin, they are relatively motionless. Their enthusiasm or concern is only slightly visible by the occasional arm wave or nail bite. Maybe it's a good thing that the reporter is nowhere to be found. Standing next to Rick, the scene feels too wonderful for adults.

He straps his helmet. For safekeeping, he offers a piece of paper, which he's told me is his last will and testament. "Don't open," he instructs. "It's major bad mojo to read a will when the person's still alive."

I try not to show my nerves. "Did you leave anything for me?"

"Let's hope we don't find out."

After a final check of the shocks and tires, Rick speeds toward the sandpit wall. Chloe, ever devoted, wears my brother's army jacket over a loose white dress. Around her neck she has tied one of his blue paisley bandanas. She blows him kisses on his approach while I run after his loud, angry dirt cloud.

That's the last image I remember before tripping, falling headfirst on a rock.

According to those in attendance, not only did Rick sail over Chloe with ease, he had the where-with-all to wave at the crowd midflight.

This was more than enough proof for Chloe of his love.

Hours later she filled me in on the details while tending my wounds.

"He was Evel Knievel," she gushed, holding a compress to my bruised

forehead. "A real daredevil, your brother."

"Tell me again," I said. "Start from the beginning."

And like that, she told me again how when Rick landed everyone circled his bike to congratulate him on his amazing feat. One by one he shook hands and hugged his fans but saved his biggest hug for her.

And it turns out the reporter did show up. In between pats on the back and kisses on the cheek from well-wishers, the reporter would ask why he went and did what he did – "Why risk your life?" to which Rick would respond, tapping his chest, "Why for love, of course."

There was one important detail, however, that Chloe left out, and who could blame her. This I learned later in the basement when the stars I was experiencing fledged.

It had to do with my geometry teacher. Miss Godfrey.

On the following Monday when I returned to school she was not there. Her personal belongings, the portrait of Euclid (the father of Geometry himself) and the inspirational signs she papered the room with were nowhere to be found.

"Private school," John Vail said. "Are you happy, jack-off?"

"Come again, Vail," I said.

"She was at the sandpit the other day."

"So."

"She saw *everything*."

He meant Chloe. I'm not sure my brother ever told Miss Godfrey about her.

In the back row, my friends Skunk and Willy had their heads pressed on their desks. At the chalkboard, Allison Wheeler drew flowers.

We waited for our substitute.

Page 4 of 5   « Previous   1   2   3   4   5   Next »

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« Previous Post  
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## Wild Kingdom

### PAY NOW OR PAY LATER

Days later our father's bread truck is parked in the yard. He's home early. Outside is warm and bugs scatter like fat atoms across the air. I've skipped out on detention because Rick told me that today our lives may change. He said be home for dinner but I couldn't wait.

Once inside, I find our father sitting at the kitchen table nursing his standard 7 and 7. Our mother, meanwhile, dangles a Virginia Slim over the sink, steadying herself on the sideboard, and though she has stopped her constant dancing, her red hair is dull and out of sorts from days spent indoors. The vibe is tense.

To avoid conflict, I retreat to the sundeck and pull out a book of knots Rick has lent me and pretend to read in anticipation of this promised new life.

Eventually Rick joins us.

In cowboy hat and fringe he brings home his usual smell of exhaust and swamp.

Our father looks at Rick like an intruder. Rick goes over to our mother.

“Greetings, mama,” he says and kisses her on the forehead asking what he’s missed. She smiles and touches his shoulder with a lingering hand of acceptance, informing him we are in for a treat. “And don’t we know it,” she says.

Apparently our father has made his soon-to-be-famous tuna casserole. At least it will be once the editors at *Family Circle* get back to us on that annual cooking contest of theirs. For the past six months what’s in the mailbox has been the question of the day.

Rick pulls up a chair.

In his best Apache drawl he says, “What’s happening, kemosabe?”

“Crawdad.” I tip my head.

“Your eyes appear a bit bloodshot.”

I shoot him a look but understand what he’s up to. He dares to blow our cover whenever he has the chance. It’s his way of challenging authority. He winks.

Our father goes to the stove. On his way he takes Rick’s cowboy hat and tosses it to the floor. Rick shrugs in indifference. The old man then divvies out tuna with string beans and Campbell’s condensed mushroom soup, topped with toasted breadcrumbs. After each ladle he whistles, and he is proud. But looking at our plates it is apparent to me why it’s taking so long to hear from the magazine:

Picture road kill.

Imagine it baked under a summer sun.

Before grace our father begins, “I had an interesting conversation at Rick’s high school today.” His voice is that of a scowling elder, informed by a parent/teacher conference earlier on.

Our mother is unusually quizzical. She asks how it went and when we should expect graduation tickets to arrive. Caught in the moment, she thinks aloud about the type of dress she should wear for the occasion.

"Heels or flats?" she asks, to no one in particular. "Maybe it will be a sun hat sort of affair? I will need a proper purse."

There at the table we learn there won't be any tickets or need for a dress, sunhat, dress shoes or purse because Rick won't be graduating, at least not this spring. He's only passing shop. A remarkable achievement even by his standards. In precise tones our father asks my brother what he has to say for himself. "Please," he says. "You have our undivided attention."

Rick is unresponsive.

"Start with the positives and work your way down. You got an A in shop. That's great. We know you're skilled there. But the rest? Mr. Cromwell, your English teacher, he doesn't even have a grade for you."

Arms folded, Rick slouches in his chair. He's an impossible read.

Sensing our parents' growing frustration I kick him under the table. Rick doesn't flinch and I am at a loss at what's going on in that Indian's head. I think it's only the drugs. He stares as if he can see what's on the other side of the kitchen walls. He continues to do so for some time. This will tick my memory later on, miles from this table, on an occasion when I will understand little about my brother, and even less about our family. Somehow he is unconcerned with everyday matters or the manners of family. His world consists only of exit signs.

What our father offers for insight is, "Pay now or pay later," which is his way of telling Rick the free ride is over. From here on he will live by new rules. Rick will finish out the school year and take make-up classes until he completes his work. Rent is expected at the end of the week, no exceptions. Of course, he will have a curfew. "Consider yourself under house arrest," he says, and begins to eat without prayer.

To break the tension I tap my water glass, announce, "Rick and I are going to spend the summer on Great Pond."

This pulls Rick slightly back into the world of the living. He shakes his head.

Our mother reaches for her Gallo. "Is that so?"

“Watch me now,” I say with supreme confidence, making a sextant with my knife and fork to show how we are going to chart our course. Arms raised, I trace Andromeda and Capricorn across our smoke-stained ceiling. The Big Dipper quadrant of cigarette and cooking spots line up under the ceiling fan. “We’re going to follow the stars everywhere we go.”

Our father finishes his drink. “Not now, Jackie.”

“And feast on our slaughter,” I add.

Perfectly cool, Rick reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a clove cigarette. “For what it’s worth,” he says, “my destiny is in Florida.” He lights. “JT’s too.”

Stunned, my utensils drops. His words are that of a misprinted fortune cookie.

“Florida?” I ask.

Our father, not usually generous with consideration when it comes to the whimsical nature of his eldest son, crosses his arms and sips at his new drink as if whiskey was food for thought.

“Why Florida?” I repeat.

Eventually our father weighs in. “By all means send us a postcard,” he says. “Once you have a diploma you’re your own man. Until then, you need a ticket to ride, Ringo.”

Rick smirks.

Our father then adds, “But I doubt you’ll be going anywhere.”

“I want to go to Florida,” I say, charged by the prospect of this thrilling idea.

“Maybe we’ll all go, Jackie,” our mother suggests in pastoral cadence. “Our family could use a vacation.”

Before Rick can blow another smoke ring, our father snags his cigarette and drops it in his glass. He demands my brother sit up. A smoke cloud floats above his Coke.

About this time during our family arguments is when our father will typically tell me to leave. After clearing his throat he will point to the door leading to the basement, and I will know what this means. A talk. I'll hit the stairs only to listen in on the back and forth at the bottom of stairwell. But before leaving, I'll make it a point to tip my plate and say out of loyalty to Crawdad, "this is slop old man," then get up from my chair, secretly hoping that my actions will impress everyone, especially Rick.

This dinner, however, I'm told to stay.

"Take note, Jackie," our father says. "Your brother is heading for certain failure."

Like me, our mother is at a loss. She has a puzzled look on her face. "Buddy," she says. "Grades, spades. Tell me what's really going here."

Our father refuses to answer the question. He remains the only one eating.

"Well look at you," she says. "Don't let us interrupt."

Between bites his throat makes pained swallows.

At random our mother interjects, "Son...Rick...Crawdad...What your father means...You might want to consider...Down the road...A diploma...Who knows?"

But I know they're both saying something else.

"Rick," they're pointing out, "think about Jackson. He looks up to you."

Later, in the basement, Rick is under his pelt. Standing over his bed I ask if he'd like to smoke some dope or take the raft out for a cruise or maybe shoot BB guns at the oak tree that separates our yard from our neighbor.

"What's so great about Florida?" I ask, not knowing exactly what I mean.

Rick sits up. His eyes look like bruised fruit. I can see what he will look like in twenty years. He tells me he has to leave. He says he can't stay here, trapped this way – waiting for the trigger. Like he said earlier, we'll one day have our own language. We'll have a hundred words for kill. But the longer he stays, the harder it will be to wean from our mother tongue.

"Not to worry, Hippie. When I come back we'll gather supplies as well as other recruits. Then we'll drop anchor. *Libertas* will be our vessel to a new mythology."

"Out of sight," I say.

"Man, when we're done, they'll build a Pantheon for us, if you know what that is."

"Really, the Parthenon?"

"Pantheon. Parthenon. Whatever. It will be beautiful. Frontier times."

"Like Magellan."

"You got it, little brother. We'll be greeted as heroes in every port. We'll lack nothing. Not mention you'll have your choice of goddesses."

My imagination floats from pirates to fire gods to war paint to Miss Godfrey.

"How's that sound?"

"That sounds *amazing*," I say, loud enough for our parents to hear.

"But we're not cubs anymore. Dig?"

"Crawdad, I like that."

I consider what his leaving will mean. What it'll be like to have the downstairs to myself.

Instinctively, I jump on him.

“Can I have your records?”

*Stace Budzko is published or forthcoming in Versal, Redivider, Upstreet, Necessary Fiction, Hint Fiction, PANK, Hobart, elimae, Los Angeles Review, Night Train, Collagist, Flash Fiction Forward, Quick Fiction and elsewhere. The screen adaptation of his story, “How to Set a House on Fire” was recently awarded Best in Show/Best Overall/Best Drama at Spotlight Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, Westport Film Festival respectively. At present, he is writer-in-residence at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.*

Page 5 of 5   « Previous   1   2   3   4   5   Next »

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