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Water and Oil

NONE OF THIS is true. All of this is true. I want to tell you about a boy in a boat on a nameless creek. About dawn reflected on the water but so dim over the swamp that it failed to illuminate the spaces between the trees.

The boy's name was Henry Rufus Bragg and though he was seventeen years old and would most likely have been offended by my description, there was still enough boy about him that the word remains appropriate. He was handsome but in an unfinished way, especially in summer when the sun freckled his nose and cheeks, blurring his features, a faint constellation half a shade darker than his tan. Six foot three now and not through yet, his bones ached at night with growing pains. A late bloomer, his mother called him, the last of the model airplane builders, a tender boy, a quiet boy, an odd and earnest boy who, like the keeper of some lost art, memorized old knock-knock jokes and repeated them in his head when he was bored.

He lived on the nameless creek with his mother and his father and his younger sister in a white house with long windows and plantation shutters, porches front and back, the only house in sight. The creek drained into Dog River—*Riviere du Chien* on the original French settlers' maps—and here the boy, called Bragg by everyone who knew him, would nudge the throttle down, boat nosing upward before easing into a plane, spray hissing around the hull, often as not startling a sleeping egret into flight. At moments like those, racing toward the big houses with big wharves crowding both banks of the river and away from the lush untidiness of the creek, the boy was washed with a feeling he could not have put into words, a kind of rising, something to do with youth and his own fluency behind the wheel and how well he knew and loved this place.

Ten minutes to Dog River Bridge, then forty more between the channel markers in Mobile Bay to Dauphin Island, where the EPA had set up shop. I am writing, of course, about that recent season when the offshore oil rig Deepwater Horizon blew out in the Gulf and the bottom of the ocean sprang a leak. His father owned a marina, where the boy had worked previous summers, scraping barnacles, painting

hulls. Though he could have used the boy's help—that summer more than most; he could see the hard times coming—his wife wanted to encourage her son's better instincts and neither of them wanted the children to worry. So they agreed to let him volunteer, after school at first and then, once school let out, from morning until dusk. Because the boy had his own boat, a bearded Oregonian named Jinx MacFee put him to work patrolling the mouth of Mobile Bay, eyes peeled for signs of oil.

Once he'd reported for duty, the boy charted a course back and forth from Fort Gaines to Fort Morgan, between which Admiral Farragut damned the torpedoes at the tag end of the Civil War. He was careful to steer clear of the hulking tankers headed in and out of port, his wake fading, reconstituting itself, Willie Nelson twanging in his earbuds, summer stoking up with every hour, baseball cap shading his eyes, chuckling periodically at the jokes he told himself. At noon, he veered in the direction of his father's marina to refill his tank with gas, charge a hamburger at the snack bar, and pass a few minutes in the presence of Dana Pint, the girl I should have known would be the first to break his heart.

In order to entice sport fishermen and leisure craft, the boy's father hired pretty girls to man the snack bar and the bait shop and the gas pumps at his marina. They dressed in white shorts and fitted T-shirts with the marina logo across the breast. It should be noted that the boy had known dozens of these girls over the years, admired their tan legs and their ponytails, highlighted by hours in the sun. They had flirted with him for as long as he could remember, first because he was a child, quick to blush, then because he was tall, good-looking, the owner's son. Dana Pint was different. She was too skinny, for one thing, and her teeth were crooked. Her hair wasn't long enough for a ponytail. Most of the girls wore sneakers to avoid splinters on the dock but Dana Pint went barefoot, her toes so nimble-looking the boy imagined she could use them to pick up coins.

The first thing she said to the boy that summer was, "What are you looking at?" Like a tough girl in some movie. He'd forgotten not to stare. She was pumping gas for a twin-engine Robalo at the time, one hand on her hip, the boy perched halfway up the steps between the dock and the snack bar. He poked the last of a hamburger into his cheek and walked down to where she stood.

"I'm Bragg."

He extended his hand. She didn't take it.

“I know who you are,” she said.

The boy was so unused to hostility, life came so sweetly and easily to him, that he hardly recognized the resistance in her posture and her tone. Any other summer the dock would have been lined with boats of various sizes, marina girls tending their needs, but on this day, there was only Dana Pint gassing the Robalo, rods craning up from their holders like insect legs, and the boy and his boat, a Boston Whaler skiff, a gift from his father on his fifteenth birthday, tied to a pylon at the end of the dock, stern tailing out into the bay on a receding tide.

“Knock, knock,” he said.

“I’ve got a boyfriend. His name is Pat.”

“You’re supposed say, ‘Who’s there?’”

I asked the boy once about his fondness for knock-knock jokes and he said he liked how they were all the same but different, too, how words and names took on new meanings in the pattern. That may not be an exact quote but it’s close. I remember being struck by the ready astuteness of his reply, like he had wondered the same thing about himself.

Dana Pint squinted at the boy, lips pursed, a mean and wary look.

“You’re standing here in this heat telling me a knock-knock joke?”

“That’s right. I say, ‘Knock, knock,’ you say . . .”

“Who’s there?”

The boy said, “Orange.”

Just then, the gas pump clicked, tank full, and Dana Pint rattled the nozzle back into its slot. For a second or two he believed she was going to let him finish the joke. But she brushed past him and on up the steps to the snack bar, splayfooted, legs so thin he could see inches of daylight between her thighs.

When he wasn’t patrolling the bay, the boy could be found in his basement lifting weights, bulking up for the last football season of his high school career—he played tackle on both sides of the ball—or pulling his friends on an inner tube around Dog River, whipping his boat in tight, thrilling, centrifugal turns, the other boys grim-faced, the girls squealing in their bikinis. And sometimes, on Fridays, after he finished his rounds, he’d pass an hour or two with me. For longer than the boy had been alive, I’d lived on a houseboat in the slip I rented at his father’s marina. Every Friday I would buy a six-pack at the snack bar and ice it down and boil whatever crabs I’d pulled up in my traps. The boy’s father didn’t mind him

drinking a single beer in the company of an old man he trusted, his most loyal customer, a widower of nineteen years, living on just enough pension to make rent on my slip. Occasionally, his father even joined us, but most Fridays it was just me and the boy in folding chairs on the aft deck of *The Agnes Rae*—named for my late wife—sipping cold, cold beer and tossing bread ends to sea gulls while we waited for the crabs to boil. He was such a polite boy that he indulged my questions about his life without complaint: what exactly was the EPA doing out on Dauphin Island and did he think his team might make the playoffs in the fall and was he making progress with any of those girls he pulled behind his boat? It was in this way that I happened upon his interest in Dana Pint.

“The trashy one?” I said. “The new girl?”

Mornings I heard her boyfriend’s souped-up Nissan whining like mosquitoes on the way to drop her off, saw his lips on her neck in the parking lot, his hands all over, the whole sordid business repeated at five o’clock. When I asked for her help at the marina—let’s say I needed a bucket of crickets for my cane pole—she’d huff like working was a nuisance. The only reason she was hired in the first place was the boy’s father had offset impending losses with wage cuts and the usual marina girls could no longer afford the job.

The boy said, “I don’t think she’s trashy.”

His eyes were focused on some inward middle distance, his expression exactly as I pictured it as he scanned the water for oil from his boat. You can understand the place he occupied in my imagination. He had so much but remained somehow unsullied by his blessings. It was of no small concern to bear witness as he persevered with Dana Pint.

“Knock, knock,” he’d say, when he could catch her by herself and she’d just stare at him like he was simple, though the meanness and mistrust in her eyes began to fade. Once, while Dana Pint was hosing fish guts and sequins of white scales from the filleting station, the boy repeated his usual line and she said, “Goddamn it, who’s there?”

“Al,” he said.

“Al who?”

“Al give you a kiss,” the boy said, “if you open this door.”

Dana Pint let her mouth gape for a moment.

“How old are you?”

He told her. She shook her head.

“If Pat caught you out here telling me corny jokes, he’d whip your ass.”

Then she spritzed him with the hose, a fine, cool mist, before turning the water on her bare feet, which must have been blazing on those hot planks, baked white and warped by the sun.

In those first weeks after the spill, the evening news broadcast endless video shot from helicopters, rainbows of oil on the surface of the Gulf, vast murky swaths of it beneath, and though we understood that there was nothing to be gained from rubbernecking our misfortune, we couldn't turn it off, tracking the oil's progress as it drifted from the coast of Louisiana to the coast of Mississippi, ever closer, always closer, the ruined well pumping black gallons of it, black as a bad mood.

The boy wanted to be vigilant, tireless. If oil invaded the bay, he aimed to be the one to spot it. But he worried, some mornings, that by then it would be too late, that it was already too late. Oil would be sucked out of the Gulf and into the bay and into the estuary rivers that fed it, pulled still farther on the tide into the nameless creek, darkening the water like a cloud shadow. On those mornings, he felt something like panic beating in his veins. He tried to channel his apprehension into watchfulness, his eyes focused on the rolling surface of the bay, the bay iridescent with sunlight, but he could only maintain his concentration for so long before an image of Dana Pint would rise unbidden from the water like a mirage: skinny legs, crooked teeth, sunburned skin peeling on the knobs of her shoulders and the bridge of her nose and the knuckles of her toes. His worry evaporated like bow spray before these visions and no matter how hard he tried to put them out of mind, to focus on the task at hand, he couldn't stop picturing Dana Pint in his boat, smiling at him over her shoulder, pale hair roughed by the wind.

The boy had, with great patience, plied enough information from her to assemble a vague portrait of her life. Nineteen. Junior-college dropout. A watcher of television and reader of magazines. She lived with another girl in one half of a duplex. She had no aspirations that he could tell. But she was angry. And she was sad. About what he did not know. The boy was not completely innocent. I'm sure there were other girls willing to submit to his fumbblings. He could not have explained the intensity of his attraction to Dana Pint, that blissful ache that welled up in his chest at the sight of her barefooting across the dock, the feeling a distant cousin of nostalgia, as if he'd already won and loved and lost her, but I can tell you he was the kind of boy—as many of us were—drawn to damaged beauty. He wanted, without realizing it, to rescue her. For her part, I suspect, Dana Pint wanted and did not want to be rescued, was both flattered and affronted by the nature of his admiration.

Near the end of May, because there were no other boats in need of fuel just then, she filled the boy's tank for him while he was ordering lunch. Two days later, she let him buy her a hot dog and a Coke but she only ate three bites before dropping the hot dog in the trash and lighting a cigarette. He did not remind her that his father prohibited smoking on the dock.

"No knock-knock jokes today?" she said.

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Maybe you'd like to go for a ride. On my boat."

Dana Pint took a last drag and flipped her cigarette toward the water. It landed short of the edge and the boy watched to be sure the breeze carried it over the side.

"I'm supposed to be working," she said.

"Not right now," he said. "This weekend."

There was a smear of mustard at the corner of her mouth and without thinking the boy went for it with his thumb but she pulled away, wiped it herself with the heel of her hand, and licked the mustard from her skin.

The next day EPA and coast guard men hung long booms across the mouth of the bay as a hedge against the oil but Jinx the Oregonian told the boy they'd still need him to patrol in case the oil slipped past. The boy made his morning rounds with nausea tugging at his guts, though he'd never been seasick in his life.

At noon, Dana Pint came out to meet him on the dock.

"Knock, knock," he said.

She said, "All right."

He opened his mouth to say *honeybee* but stopped himself just short. Instead, as if she was leading him toward a new kind of punch line, he said, "All right what?"

"Six o'clock," she said. "It won't be so hot out then and we'll still have plenty of daylight. Saturday. You can pick me up right here."

"Honeybee," he said.

Dana Pint did not smile often in the boy's experience. When she did, as now, she pressed her lips together to hide her crooked teeth but the boy had come to recognize the amusement in her eyes, the way they crinkled into black lines, nearly shut, all squint and lashes, like curtains hiding light.

Most nights the boy built model airplanes in his room. From his ceiling, hung by fishing line, dangled a Spitfire, a Phantom, a Hornet, a Falcon, a Kingfisher, a

Dreamliner, a Mustang, a Messerschmitt, a Heinkel, a Fokker, an Airbus, a Foxbat, a Frogfoot, a 747, a Tornado, a Lancer, a Camel, a Nighthawk, a Thunderjet, a Panther, a Lightning, a Tomcat, a Dauntless, a Harrier, and a Concorde, so many planes, he told me once, that their wings ticked together when the breeze sighed through the screen. I'd have guessed the boy would have been more interested in boats, but he went on building planes—further evidence that we are enticed by that which is separate from our lives. He had started a P-61 Black Widow but it remained half-finished on his desk, the engine cowling unattached, as if it had landed there for repairs. The boy stretched out in bed, watching the planes sway above him, the air scented with marsh and model glue, his computer linked to an Internet site offering round-the-clock footage of the Deepwater Horizon billowing crude like black smoke into the Gulf.

Rapping at the door—knock, knock.

“Who’s there?” said the boy.

His father spilled a puddle of light in from the hall, one hand on the knob, one on the jamb. “Everything all right?”

“Fine.”

“Awfully quiet up here.”

“Just tired.”

His father’s eyes flicked to the computer, that ceaseless gush and bubble.

“I’m worried, too,” he said.

He was not entirely off the mark. The boy was worried. But not about oil. For hours, he had been fretting the options for his boat ride with Dana Pint. He considered Middle Bay Light, which was beautiful at sunset. Or they could anchor off of Gaillard Island, where the brown pelicans made their roost, thriving again after near extinction, first because of hunting—their feathers had once been a popular adornment for women’s hats—then because of DDT. Now, according to Jinx the Oregonian, the EPA estimated more than ten thousand nests on the island, not just pelicans but herons and skimmers, stilts and terns and rails, snugged in among the bulrush. For a while, after his father shut the door and left him, the boy indulged a fantasy in which he pointed his boat due south and kept on motoring into the Gulf until they ran out of gas. He imagined long days waiting for rescue with Dana Pint, nights desperate with stars, the ways they might use their bodies to soothe each other’s fear.

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