

Gigging

Boggy mud oozed between toes as the pair thrust their exposed legs through the knee-high grass and weeds. They straddled or sometimes leaped puddles that lingered from a recent downpour. On a mission to get her momma out of the funk and erase the sting, JoLee conspired with Thomas Ray. They were convinced the solution lay in the murky waterhole.

Briars flourished beneath the leaf-laden live oaks and indomitable mesquites. Pesky gnats and mosquitos buzzed their heads in the late afternoon heat. They swatted, rarely making contact. The scratches and bites did not halt the two as they made way to the water, gigs in hand; their dirt-packed nails scratching the bites on exposed arms and legs.

The humid August Texas heat formed perspiration on their upper lips and created a clamminess in their armpits and the folds of their knees. JoLee and Thomas Ray spent much time in the outdoors. It was a feeling they were accustomed.

The pond rested less than a quarter mile from their homes in a pasture leased by an oil company, owned by a family now living in Dallas. Beyond the pasture, out of their sight, they heard a golfer swear loudly followed by laughter.

Thomas Ray's father would be there. Commonly called T. Ray, described his father's days at the country club in great detail to JoLee countless times acting out the swagger his father used to enter the front door of their house after an afternoon with his buddies. His father would return home with his neck sunburned and a plastered grin, courteous of the contents he had shared with his buddies from the cooler. It made her snicker.

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Her situation at home didn't parallel T. Ray's. Alcohol didn't have the same effect on her momma. There were new holes burned in the floral sofa where she missed the ashtray, a repugnant smell of cheap booze, and a hostile demeanor JoLee did her best to circumvent.

JoLee didn't understand golf or why anyone would torture themselves in the heat to roll a ball to a hole. There was nothing to show for it. At least with frog gigging there was a delicious meal afterwards. Fried frog legs with a side of gravy. Nothing, not anything, could beat that.

Except her brother coming home.

She would not lose focus. Her momma said that was why he went missing. Today she would not let her momma down. The frogs would be divided. Some for T. Ray because he came up with the idea but more importantly, more than half for JoLee's mom with the leftovers going in the freezer. It was her mother's favorite meal. JoLee would prove her worthiness. Of course what she really wanted was love.

Thomas Ray and JoLee formed their friendship after meeting at the gate between their houses on the day JoLee, her brother, and mother moved in to the rent house next door. They were five. Neither spoke. Eyeing each other over the gate, it would be days before T. Ray would pitch the idea of riding bikes only to find out she didn't have one.

That is when T. Ray borrowed a friend's and gave JoLee lessons until she balanced it on her own and maneuvered down the dirt road. That was the day JoLee knew she would always love T. Ray. Half their lives as best friends cemented by location, respect, and frog gigging.

A black water moccasin eased its way to the pond. The black, shimmering body caught the filtered rays forced through thick vegetation. It reminded JoLee of the strings of crude

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floating in the pits between the pond and the golf course—iridescent and deadly. Thomas Ray signaled and pointed. They were in dangerous company. JoLee nodded.

T. Ray yelped and slapped his right arm as a horsefly buzzed away unscathed. A trickle of blood dripped from the wound. JoLee gave him a sympathetic look. Horseflies were the worst. She licked her finger and rubbed his upper arm. He shrugged her away and pointed onward.

Flashlights bulged the back pockets of their overalls. Later, after they netted the frogs, light would be necessary to find their way home. In Thomas Ray's other hand, he carried a net and his pocket was stuffed with something made by his mother. He would share with JoLee. She knew he had some kind of treat. He always did.

A cricket sprang from the vegetation landing on JoLee's big toe. She suppressed a giggle that thrust its way through her teeth. She snorted.

"Shhh," said T. Ray. She mustered her game face. Today's gigging was important. If she brought home an ample catch perhaps momma would smile. It had been months.

In the distance, the Rock Island could be heard blowing its seven o'clock whistle as it crossed the road next to JoLee's house.

"Let's get our stuff set up. How about by the rock?" T. Ray said. Ever the organizer, Thomas Ray liked his giggers, net, and bucket lined in the order they were used. His daddy's loaded handgun weighed his front pocket. He hadn't used, nor acknowledged it, but JoLee recognized the form. On the many trips to the pond, the gun hadn't come up in conversation. It must be for snakes. Just in case. He was protecting her.

"Ray Ray, you know I like gigging by the stump," JoLee said.

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“And you know I hate it when you call me that. It’s just a ploy to get your way. That’s what Ernest says.”

“Ernest. What does he know? Remember last time? That’s where we caught the most.”

“Yeah, okay. Just don’t call me that in front of my friends. They think there’s something, um, different, about our relationship.”

“Are you serious right now? Oh my Gawd!”

“There you go again. Taking the Lord’s name in vain.”

“I’ll ask forgiveness when I say my prayer tonight. Right along with all the other stuff,” JoLee said.

“That other stuff isn’t your fault, you know.” Thomas Ray said.

“He was MY responsibility.”

“He was s-l-o-w,” T. Ray said.

“I hate when people say that about him.” Tears welled in JoLee’s eyes.

“I just mean it’s not your failing. He wandered off.”

“Momma said it was.” JoLee wiped her eyes and dried the tears lingering on the back of her hand using her shorts as a hankerchief.

“I will never call you Ray Ray in front of anyone again. Promise.”

“Let’s start giggin’ by the stump.” Thomas Ray said, changing the subject.

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Thomas Ray edged to the stump at the fringe of the pond, lining the two giggers against the north end of the large block of wood, followed by the net, and the bucket. He left enough room on the end for sitting and waiting.

JoLee brushed a wiggling caterpillar into the damp blades of grass making a place for herself on the wooden seat.

“Already sittin’?”

“Just waiting for the croaking to begin. Then I’ll be like one of those Ninja’s in the Japan chapter of our history books.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll see.” Thomas Ray planted himself on the stump.

As their butts numbed, the pair rocked on the log to bring feeling to their backsides. The sun sank low over the distant hill and the pasture came alive as the cicada’s snapped their wings. Crickets entered the chorus. Male frogs vibrated their throats, calling in the dark to the females, advertising their location. Anticipation grew. JoLee and Thomas Ray peered across the pond searching for movement. The wildlife chorus became deafening. It was time.

Thomas Ray handed JoLee a gig. Flashlights slid from their pockets and they focused the light on the pond and the glassy eyes that stared at them. The well-oiled team worked in silence, holding a flashlight in one hand and gig in the other. They each circled their intended prey, thrusting the gig into the body of the frogs. Lying flashlights on the ground, they would pass the net back and forth as needed, to scoop the frogs from the gig and drop them in the bucket by the stump.

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At water's edge JoLee stabbed a large frog. After depositing it in the bucket, she continued to watch Thomas Ray as he moved closer to the rock, his favorite gigging spot. JoLee's catch was significant. She knew momma would be pleased when she returned home.

She enjoyed observing Thomas Ray's quest for a larger frog, then a larger. The reflection of his face, caught by the glow of the flashlight, made her chuckle. His tongue was pushed to one side of his mouth. His eyes displayed the look of a rabid dog. He moved like a mountain lion through the weeds. His fierce look gave way to satisfaction as he dropped the last frog of the night in the bucket. A shock of red hair covered his face but JoLee knew it was eeking with pride.

"My mom's gravy always taste better with frog legs," Thomas Ray said. He was licking the corners of his mouth as he spoke.

"You're such a dork. Nobody gets that excited about gravy."

"Oh, you are wrong. My dad does. I do. Ernest does. I guess it's the way to a man's heart."

"Good grief. First of all, the only one in that list that's a man is your dad," JoLee said.

"And second?"

JoLee stumbled for more words.

"That's what I thought," Thomas Ray said.

"I'll race you home."

"Not tonight. The bucket is too full."

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“Ever the careful one. The prudent one,” JoLee said.

“There you go again. Using those spelling words to sound superior.”

“Just wait. Someday I’ll leave this town for the bright lights of a big city. And I’ll be rich and famous. No more suspicions. No more pity eyes. I need a superior vocabulary to get out of this dump.”

“When I grow up, I’ll sit on the dock and fish all day.”

“Dork. You will probably take over your dad’s cattle business. Riding on his coattails all the way to the bank.”

“Maybe. Hey, JoLee, can you grab the gigs? Don’t want mom and dad to get bent out of shape, Thomas Ray said. Brought some jerky to tide us over until supper.”

“Thanks.” JoLee took the jerky from Thomas Ray’s hand tearing it with her teeth and chewing. It would be all she had until morning.

JoLee pushed the button of her flashlight and scanned the area by the stump to locate the gigs. The light spread through the briars casting a foggy glow over the pasture. At the edge of the light, something foreign to the land lay in the brush. She walked past the stump and gigs, entranced by the object.

Thomas Ray called to her. “Hey. Where are you going?”

He turned his flashlight in the direction of JoLee. He set the bucket and net on the ground by the pond and followed. She stopped about twenty yards ahead of him and crouched, reaching for something in the brush. Her flashlight thudded to the dirt.

She screamed.

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Thomas Ray tugged at JoLee's arm to steer her away but she was stronger than him. She draped herself over the decaying body, her hand clutching the red high top shoe, muddied by six months of rain and blowing dirt. Her weeping turned to a sorrowful wail deep within. It excreted itself from her body as a mournful pitch beyond earthly sounds. Thomas Ray released JoLee's arm and muttered something.

He fled.

The choir of crickets, frogs and cicadas sensed the change and fell silent. Thomas Ray pushed through the darkness with an occasional lightning bug illuminating the way. He stumbled. Fell. Hit a tree head-on. Shook off the pain and ran some more.

Exhausted, he stopped to catch his breath. This was the point the tears fell. He was unable to stop them. Thomas Ray clutched a tree for support and struggled for composure. He must keep going. Jolee was counting on him.

Covered in mud and bleeding from various locations on his body, he reached the screen door of his house, throwing it open, and charging into the tranquil living room where his father sat by the television broadcasting the nightly news. His mother was sipping what he knew to be vodka from his great grandmother's china tea cup. The one with the pink hand-painted roses.

"We. Found. Him."

They knew who "him" was. Mother stumbled from her chair, spilling the teacup. It rocked like a metronome on the end table. She clamored to the phone on the kitchen wall and his father grabbed his jacket from the hook on the wall and followed T. Ray out the door.

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Thomas Ray's father started the orange International Scout and pulled the headlight knob with Thomas Ray pointing the way. They drove along the tracks, maneuvering as close as possible to the fence. Police sirens and an ambulance could be heard squealing behind them.

When they reached as close as a proximity as possible, Thomas Ray's father pulled the Scout beyond the culvert and close to the barbed wire fence. Thomas Ray pulled at the barbed wire creating a hole for his father to access the pasture. His father did the same for his son. They began running through the brush, briars nipping at their legs. Both had forgotten a flashlight.

The sound of the wailing girl guided them through the dark.

Thomas Ray's father slipped on the overturned bucket righting himself coming in contact with the congregation of frogs. His son extended a hand. The flash of red lights stopped close to the tracks on the perimeter of the pond and cast an eerie glow over the water and beyond. The flashes of light bounced from tree to tree, shrub to shrub. It helped them catch their bearings and locate the two forms prone beyond the stump.

One alive.

Another decayed beneath shirt and jeans.

They were the clothes JoLee described to the police six months prior. JoLee, Thomas Ray, and his father didn't need an autopsy report for identification. They knew.

Thomas Ray's father wrapped his arms around JoLee's body. He pulled her away from the ground and squeezed.

"It will be okay JoLee. It will be okay." She shook her head.

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Thomas Ray leaned against the stump heaving and listening to the voices crescendoing among the trees.

White lights poured through the mesquites and briars shooting rays in various directions.

The swooshing sound of feet prompted Thomas Ray's father. "We're over here."

Three police officers--the entire force, and two EMTs made their way to the open area by the pond.

The cicada chorus screamed through the dark. A bullfrog splashed into the pond until the water moccasin circled its body and bit.

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