

COLD SPRINGS

Johnny's family arrived at the spring early that morning, almost the first ones there. Johnny raced through the gate ahead of the others and claimed a spot under a tree, turning to watch them follow. Uncle Larry came next, with two beach chairs in each hand. Aunt Darla brought the picnic basket, and Johnny's dad was right behind her with the cooler. His mom was last, blankets and towels in her arms, her legs white and jiggling below the T-shirt with big blue words, 'I'm so good when I'm bad.' She leaned over to spread the blanket on the ground. Her bathing suit rode up and two soft white moons hung out behind.

His dad grabbed a chair from Uncle Larry.

"Hey, watch it buddy."

"Watch it your own self. Have a beer."

Johnny loved to watch his dad drink the first beer. He tilted his head back, poured it in, smacked his belly and belched.

"Now I got room for another."

Johnny was still trying to figure out how to swallow air. Finally he produced a little sound, more like a hiccup than a belch.

"Getting there, Johnny."

"Can I have some of your beer, Dad?"

His dad handed over the can, a few swallows left, and pulled out another for himself. He snapped off the tab and flipped it toward the springs. Johnny downed the beer.

"Hey Johnny, down at the bottom it's half spit," Uncle Larry said. "You been drinking your daddy's spit, boy."

"Shut up Larry," his mom said. "Why you always picking on him?"

"You shut up, Ginelle. Just teaching him about life."

Johnny felt a little sick, but he laughed with his uncle. He reached over and took a handful of potato chips. His dad shoved the dip closer and winked at him.

The sun was still low but the air was already warm and steamy. He watched people coming through the gate but didn't see anyone he knew. People spread out along the bank with towels and chairs and coolers. A Black family was spreading their blankets near the concession stand, with a lounge chair for the grandma. As soon as they had her settled, they turned on their radio; Rihanna was singing "Lift Me Up."

"Oh man, I don't want to hear that shit. They got Classics Countdown on Country 103, turn it way up Darla," his dad said.

"C'mon Harlan, don't go starting trouble," his mom said. "I want to relax, have a good time."

"Well, it's not like when we was kids, Ginelle. All kinds of people coming here now."

"Why shouldn't they? They got their rights."

"What about my rights? I grew up with those people, you never even seen one till you came down here. Your family just a bunch of hillbillies."

"Rather be a hillbilly than a redneck like you."

"Man, she got you with that one," Larry said.

“So is Johnny a hillbilly or a redneck?” Darla asked. “I thought they were the same thing.”

She was from California.

Johnny didn’t know what he was. In September, when it felt like summer could go on forever, they’d go up to his grandparents’ farm near Asheville to cool off and see the fall.

“He got the best of both of us, right Ginelle?”

“Yup. I’m your hillbilly honey, you’re my redneck rogue.”

“You should write songs, Ginelle,” Darla said.

“I know, but I can’t sing. Anyway, I never can get past the first line.”

Aunt Darla stood up and unzipped her shorts. They all watched as she pulled them down and slipped off her T-shirt.

"Quit looking," she said, smiling at his dad.

Johnny's mom was lying on her stomach; she kept her T-shirt on. Sometimes when she stood up it looked like she wasn't wearing anything underneath. Uncle Larry rubbed suntan lotion on Aunt Darla, and Johnny's dad sat in a chair, drinking his beer and watching.

“You need lotion too, Johnny.” His mom threw him the bottle.

“It’s just gonna wash off when I go in the water.”

“That’s okay, we’ll do it again. Remember when you got burned so bad last summer?”

“Yeah, you take after your momma, all white and pasty. Me and Larry, we’re naturally dark. Sun don’t burn us, just makes us darker.”

“Maybe you’re kin to those people over there.”

“Shut up Ginelle, you know we got Cherokee blood.”

“That’s what you always tell me. Here, Johnny, come sit next to me and I’ll do your shoulders and back.”

He was too old for nightly tuck-ins and he couldn’t let her hug him anymore, but this was okay. Her strong hands squeezed his shoulders and pressed into his back. Everything relaxed. Then she ruined it.

“You’re getting nice big muscles like your daddy. Does it feel good?”

Damn, why did she have to embarrass him like that? He shoved her hands away and jumped up.

“Hey.” Her hurt look just made it worse.

The first Jungle Cruise was just leaving the dock, heading down river. The diving tower was starting to fill up. A drop of sweat slid down his cheek.

“Isn’t anybody gonna swim?”

“You gotta be kidding, Johnny. Didn’t you see the sign about the gators?”

It was Aunt Darla’s first time at the spring; she and Uncle Larry had just gotten married in December.

“Gators won’t bother you,” Larry said. “We been swimming here all our lives. See, they got that rope strung up out from the beach sand where it’s okay to swim, you just don’t want to go into the grassy part.”

“Hell, Larry, we swim in Lake Lamonía – that’s full of gators, and they got no ropes. Remember how we used to wade in that creek behind our house, where Mrs. Matchen’s puppy got snatched by a gator.”

“Us girls know better, Darla, we got good sense. But you can’t stop those two.”

"You going in, Dad?"

"Yeah, I'm going. I'll beat you to the raft."

With the last word, he had dropped the beer can, and was up and running to the water, Johnny right behind him. He stopped a moment when his feet hit the water, but Johnny kept on wading up to his knees, where he fell forward and started swimming even as the cold snatched his breath. Still, when he reached the raft, his dad was already on it, and leaned down to haul him up.

They had it all to themselves. They lay down at the edge and peered over to watch the big fish swimming beneath them. The sun baked him until only his bathing suit was wet. His dad rolled over on his back and stretched.

"Boy, this is the life. Swim back over, Johnny, and bring me a beer. And some chicken while you're at it."

Johnny started to get up.

"Just kidding."

"Did you ever jump off that tower, Dad?"

"Sure, lots of times."

"You gonna do it today?"

"Nah, you know my shoulder. You want to jump?"

"Can I? Mom says I'm not big enough; I have to wait till I'm twelve."

"She would. Sure you can do it; all you got to do is jump. Let's go back. I'll get a beer and tell your mom, and then you can go up the tower."

Johnny hopped and jiggled and beat his head to get the water out of his ear, while his parents argued.

“Your baby’s turning into a man and you want to make him into a sissy.”

“Well he’s not going to turn into a man if he breaks his neck jumping off that stupid tower.”

“I been jumping from there since I was way littler than Johnny, and I guess I’m man enough for you, right Ginelle?”

“You sure are.” The way they looked at each other made him embarrassed and glad at the same time.

His dad always got his way in the end. In a minute, they were walking together to the far end of the shore, where a short dock led out to the tower.

"I'll be down here to see how high you splash."

Johnny climbed up the first ladder, eighteen rungs, the second ladder, eighteen more. Then he was at the small lower platform, where the little kids were clowning around, the bravest ones diving off. They watched him as he went up the third ladder. He watched the bottom of the girl climbing ahead of him.

The top platform was as big as his bedroom. It was crowded with teenagers, girls in bikinis and boys with hairy legs, joking and jostling. Despite the milling around, a clear space always remained by the gap in the railing. One boy jumped and was replaced by another. Now it was a redhead with blotchy freckles on his back. With his toes curled over the edge, hands glued to the rail, he leaned out over the water, pretended to fall, pulled back. Each time, a girl in a yellow bikini laughed. Finally he let go. Johnny thought he had slipped, but he curled into a perfect cannonball, and his splash reached the lower platform

Johnny stood in a corner. The others ignored him. The wooden floor was soft with dampness. Above and around them was clear blue sky. Across the spring, tall trees, jungle vines, brush in every shape and shade of green. He looked over at his family on the grass. Uncle Larry was just standing up. He reached down and grabbed Aunt Darla's hands and pulled her to her feet. They walked to the water. Uncle Larry plunged right in; Aunt Darla stopped at the edge. Uncle Larry turned around and said something, and she shook her head. He started toward her, reaching for her arm, but she moved back. He slammed both arms down in the water, giving her a huge icy splash.

Johnny scanned the shoreline for his father. He was standing waist deep in the water, watching the divers fall. Johnny yelled down to him but he didn't hear. A moment later, though, he looked up at the tower and waved.

How was Johnny going to get a turn? There wasn't any line. He watched four boys jump, and then stepped into the clear space and right over to the edge.

"You're not going to jump, are you? Hey, you guys, look who's going to break his neck."

"Oh, isn't he cute?"

It was too late to disappear back into the group. He held onto the rail, looked straight down, and stopped breathing. The water sparkled below. The swimmers looked like toys. He lifted his foot, twisted it around his ankle, looked across the water into the jungle, breathed again. He could step forward but there was nothing to step on; his foot would just sink down and he would follow.

"Jump!"

Launch himself with both feet, his whole body at once, fall farther than he had ever fallen, hit the water like a pebble, as small as the people below. He would sink right to the muddy bottom, if the gators and snakes didn't get him first. Everyone knew the river was full of them.

"Hey, kid, you gonna jump or what?"

It was the redhead, coming toward him from the ladder, water drops magnifying his freckles, hair dark and plastered to his face. Johnny swiveled to meet him, keeping one hand on the rail. At his back was the blue space, the icy water, the creatures waiting. He knew what was coming but still hoped he could save himself. If only he had a bad shoulder like his dad's. If only his dad had said no.

"I'm gonna jump in a minute."

The boy stopped a few feet away and stood staring at him. Now all the others were watching too. If he turned to face the water, they would come up behind him. The boy was counting off seconds. He had reached forty-seven.

A girl said, "Leave him alone, he's just a little kid."

He looked over and saw beyond her, shutting out everyone else, the face of his dad below, still standing in the water, staring up, waiting. Then the boy's arms were around his chest, lifting. His hands slid off the rail and he was thrown out into the air. He closed his eyes and tried to curl into a ball, but hit the water in a sprawl, felt the slap all along his side. He kept on falling, sinking to the bottom. He struggled to come back up, hold on to the breath that was left. He broke surface, and there was his dad, reaching for him. He grabbed Johnny by the arm, pulled him toward the shore even as Johnny tried to swim, coughing out water. When he could wade, he looked up at his dad's face, to see something worse than anger. He started to cry through his

coughing. His dad kept a tight hold on his upper arm as they walked along the shore, onto the grass, past the girls in bikinis lying on their towels, to the blanket by the fence, to his mom.

“Baby, are you all right?”

"Wiped out good on you, didn't he?"

“Shut up Larry.”

Johnny stood straight but his head hung down. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, still sniffing. The fence was behind him and his dad in front, arms crossed, feet planted apart.

"That was some chickenshit all right."

“Why you gotta be so mean? Come on honey, here’s some lemonade.”

They were all staring at him. He didn’t want her stupid lemonade. He didn’t need any of them. He grabbed his sneakers and ran to the creek trail where he could be alone.

It was cool in the woods. After a few yards the trail curved and no one could see him except the squirrel chattering up in the pine. He walked until he came to the creek, the shallow tannic water rolling over roots and rocks. He stood on the wooden footbridge, leaning on the railing, watching the water skimmers scooting across. He couldn't see them, just the little dents they made in the water, the shadows that danced on the sand underneath.

Someone was coming along the trail from the spring. He peeked under his arm. It was his dad. Johnny looked down at the bugs again.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

His dad leaned on the rail next to him, then made a little pile of twigs between them and started bombing the bugs. He couldn't get a hit; the twigs just joined the water skimmers, floating with the current, swinging aside when a big one skimmed past.

"I betcha I can get 'em," and Johnny brushed all his dad's twigs off the rail at once, scraping his palm on a splinter. "Bombs away."

"Good hit. Hey, your mom sent me to look for you. They all going on the boat. You wanna come?"

On the Jungle Cruise they sat on benches under a red awning. Captain Charley was an old, wiry man who spotted every bird they passed. A great blue heron standing in the gray cypress. A family of moorhens with red beaks like noses, the babies swimming around their mother. A tree full of egrets, lit by the sun. Anhingas stood on branches jutting out of the water, furry wings spread to dry.

"Look over on the right bank, folks, you'll see a whole family of gators."

A little one, a foot long, was crawling over the back of an eight-footer. Johnny's dad jumped up and went to the front of the boat. Johnny followed.

"Look at that one there, Dad."

Coming out from the brush was a monster, a twelve-footer, crawling down the hot sand and sliding into the water.

"Man, that's a big one. Hey, Larry, how'd you like to wrestle that one?"

The guide turned.

"You want to wrestle a gator, I'll get you a gator. You better sit back down, folks. Like the sign says, nobody in front of this line. Gator meat's good, but people meat's better."

They watched the banks as the boat cruised down the river and rounded an island, little more than a pile of debris, a tangle of dead branches, saplings and moss. Emerging from the green shade they swung out into the spring, directly opposite the swimming area, where boys were still jumping off the tower. Johnny, wedged in between his mom and dad, watched the falling bodies intently, his chin resting on his arm on the bench in front of him. Now it looked soft and easy, not a step onto nothing, but a drop like falling into sleep, a great plume of water at the end like a cheer.

When they pulled into the dock he said, "Dad, I want to jump again."

"Thattaboy."

They pushed through the other passengers on the dock and raced down the bank to the diving tower. Johnny kept his eyes raised as he climbed, looking up to the blue sky. A circling osprey disappeared behind treetops and sailed out again. He didn't look at anyone as he made his way over to the space by the rail. Without a pause he walked to the edge and jumped, not falling but flying, his eyes wide open, holding his nose, into the water, down and down till his toes touched the waving eelgrass, shooting back up with one downward thrust of his arms, then paddling over to where his dad stood grinning. He climbed back up the ladder to try a cannonball. The first one went off balance, and he got a slap of water in his ear; but the next one was fine, and his splash reached the second landing.

Up on the tower again, he looked down at his family. His mom was laying out the food. He took one last jump and swam over to the shore. Aunt Darla lay on her back, her eyes closed.

The tops of her breasts were turning fiery pink, but a thin white line of flesh was bulging out, not yet burned.

"What you looking at, boy?" But Uncle Larry was laughing.

"Here, have some chicken, and don't go staring at people," and his mom passed him a paper plate.

The chicken was cold and the breading was crumbling off. He sat close to his dad, to share the puddle of ketchup on his plate. He ate two pieces of chicken and a piece of pie, and finished it off with the rest of the potato chips and a glass of sweet tea, round pebbles of ice still floating in it.

After lunch, he lay on his stomach at the edge of the blanket, chin propped on one hand, poking a twig into the hole at the top of an anthill. If he sneaked a look sideways over his elbow he could see Aunt Darla, who lay on her back with one leg up, her arm thrown over her eyes. His mom and dad had gone for a walk, and Uncle Larry was going up to the truck for more beer.

"Aunt Darla."

"What?"

He didn't have anything to say, just wanted to see if she was awake.

"How come there isn't any ants here at this hill?"

She rolled over on her stomach and he could see straight down her chest.

"What are you doing? You'd better not go poking around in there, Johnny, that's fire ants. Here, let's move the blanket."

She stood up and started hauling the picnic basket and chairs to one side. Together, they dragged the blanket over a few feet. He flopped down again, and she lay beside him, her fingers

stroking the hair above his ear. The sounds of the afternoon - radio, splashes, shouts, laughter - grew more distant and faded into the warm air on his back.

He woke up, blinking to remember where he was. Spots flashed in his eyes, his head felt hot and heavy. Momma was asleep next to him, her shirt rucked up to show the bottom of her bathing suit. He stared in a daze at the grains of sand stuck to the top of her leg.

The shadows from the cypress on the bank had almost reached their blanket. People were starting to leave. He shook himself and stood up. His dad was out on the raft.

Acorns bit into Johnny's feet as he walked to the water. When it reached his ankles he woke up completely. He started swimming toward the raft, fighting off a shiver. If he opened his eyes, he could see his hands stroking through the amber water. He reached the raft and hauled himself up. His dad lay on his stomach. Johnny tiptoed over, but just when he got close enough to lean over and shake, his dad's hand shot out and caught his ankle so he almost fell over.

"Hey, boy, don't think you can catch me so easy." He sat up and looked over at the shore. "Where's your momma?"

"I dunno, she was sleeping; maybe she went up to the bathroom."

"We gotta be going soon. You want to take one more dive off the tower"?

"Nah. I ate too much." He pushed out his belly for his dad to see.

"You're getting a good beer belly, boy. C'mon, let's get going. I see them packing up.

"Will you tow me?"

"Sure."

They jumped in the water and he grabbed his dad's ankles for a free ride back to shore.

THE END