

HANNAH AND THE RIVER

I received the call just after nine Thursday evening. The voice on the other end was vaguely familiar, yet distant. “Dad’s dead,” my sister said morosely. I hadn’t seen nor spoke with her in seven years. And my father? Well, I hadn’t seen that bastard for going on ten years now. I had cut ties with him, or so I thought, when he “got Jesus” and started preaching at those small, country churches in the middle of the Ozarks.

And now he was gone.

“Funeral’s on Tuesday, can you make it Ethan?” my sister asked quietly. She sounded tired, fragile. “It’d be great to see you again, been a long, long time.” She spoke in a southern drawl that made me cringe. Suddenly I felt out of place, which was the reason I hadn’t been home in over ten years. It was uncomfortable. Hailey, who was three years older, loved the country life and all that went with it: the vegetable gardens, the late summer night walks, the canning, the cooking, the quiet, the boredom.

“Look, Hailey, let me call you back okay? I have to check my calendar and see if I can clear my schedule and--”

“This is your Father we’re talking about!” she said, almost shouting into the phone. I can’t remember ever hearing her raise her voice like that. It was at that moment I realized how important this was to my sister, how *she* needed me to be there for her, even if I could care less about the old man.

I sighed. “I’ll see what I can do and call you tomorrow, promise.”

“Really Ethan?”

“Yes, I promise. I’ll call in the morning. Now get some sleep.”

“He never stopped talking about you, even after you left,” she said, her voice barely audible now, as if she were speaking to someone else. Then she hung up.

I stared at the dead phone in my hand, those final words clinging to me like a second skin, rotting and stinking. I walked slowly up the stairs to bed, hoping that I would be able to sleep.

I woke the next morning at a little after six. I walked out on my deck wearing nothing but a pair of tattered boxers. Even at this early hour it was already warm, the mercury pushing past seventy, which meant the day would be a scorcher. Typical for July in Chicago: hot and humid. Looking out over the vast city from the nineteenth floor of my condo, I thought about last night’s phone call and the death of my father. If I was honest with myself, I had to admit that I was shaken with the news and now wondered why I hadn’t even asked Hailey the cause of death. The man wasn’t really all that old. Somewhere in his sixties, I think.

I quickly confirmed that too much analyzing would only frazzle me further, so I went back inside to the comfort of air conditioning and fixed myself a hearty breakfast of buttered toast and black coffee. I got the newspaper, sat down to my toast and coffee, and tried to relax. But the harder I tried, the more agitated I became.

Finally, I gave up and showered. I spent the next hour cleaning, pacing, cleaning, pacing. I checked my watch frequently. At eight sharp I called the office. Like the wonderful secretary she was, Helen answered on the second ring. “Law Offices of Ethan Barkley.”

“It’s me Helen.”

“Oh, hi Ethan.”

“I need...well, I’m going to be taking a couple of days off,”

“Oh?”

“I won’t be in today and...um...well...just clear my schedule for all of next week, would you please?”

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment and then she said, “Is everything okay Mr. Barkley?”

She never called me Mr. Barkley. She had been with me for over eight years, and during that time we had become good friends. I ran a small office and did mostly small time stuff: DUI’s, domestic violence cases, wills, adoptions – a lot of family law. It was a small practice, but my overhead was low, so I was able to make a good living, even in Chicago.

“Yes, everything’s fine. I’m just going home for a bit.”

“Going home? You mean back to Reed Springs?” she said. I could hear the disbelief in her voice, as if I had just broke the news that I was quitting my practice. “But you haven’t been back there for such a long time - I thought you hated the place. And you never talk about it Ethan, as if the place carries the plague or something. I’ve always wondered why you wouldn’t tell me what really happened to make you leave and never go back. Are you going to tell me now?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s none of your business and I value our friendship, not to mention your clerical skills.”

“I knew you only liked me for my brain and not my body,” she said, her voice soft yet inquisitive. I knew she wasn’t going to let me get off so easily. At fifty-nine, Helen was more like my mother than my secretary. “You really need to tell me what happened to you.”

“Maybe later Helen, but I need to go now. Just take care of the place while I’m gone.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just leave me here to do all the work while you run off and play.”

“Right. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye...and Ethan?”

“What?”

“Take care of yourself.” And then she added: “Please.”

“I will,” I said and hung up before she could say more.

I packed a suitcase, rode down to the parking garage, and climbed behind the wheel of my black, three-year-old Mercedes 500 SEL, trying to mentally prepare myself for the nine-hour trip.

Five hours later, while gassing up at a truck stop near St Louis where I’d stopped for a bite to eat, I met her. She called herself Irene, but I don’t think that was her real name. She wore jean shorts that showed most everything and a blue blouse that was neatly tied off just below her breasts, revealing her dark midsection. Her neck bore the head of a King Cobra, its sinewy body disappearing down her backside underneath her blue blouse, reappearing again like some ghost on her lower back, the tail terminating just above her beltline. She was heavily jeweled: long,

sterling silver earrings elongated her earlobes, as if they were too heavy and would soon tear through the flesh that tried desperately to hold them. Her nose was pierced like a bull; six or seven bracelets encircled her left wrist and every finger boasted a different style of ring.

She approached me just as I was replacing the pump. “You headin’ south?” she inquired with a friendly smile. I looked at this girl/woman, who couldn’t have been much more than fifteen or sixteen, standing there with her hands on her hips and a grin on her face.

“Maybe,” I replied hesitantly. “Why?”

“I jus lookin’ for a ride is all,” she said. “Going to see my boyfriend down in Springfield and I miss the bus. I could pay ya. Not much, but I could pay ya,” she said.

“How old are you?”

“Old enough.”

“Old enough for what?” The last thing I wanted was to give some underage child a ride and get busted for child endangerment. The law around this part of Missouri didn’t take too kindly to a thirty-year-old white man escorting a young black woman down the road no matter what the reason or intention.

But then she flipped me her ID, as if I were a cop. Shaking my head, I took the proffered plastic card, wondering what the hell I was thinking. I looked at the picture, then up at her, and then back at the picture. Same girl. Same grin. According to what I had in my hand, this girl was actually a young women of twenty-two. And I also noticed her name really *was* Irene. Hard to believe, but the proof was in my possession.

Hands still on her hips, she said: “Well?”

“Yeah, you’re old enough for me to not get in trouble,” I said. “I guess I could give you a ride, I don’t see any harm in that. You’re not going to try and rob me or kill me, are you?”

She laughed so hard I thought she was going to pass out. When she finally caught her breath and stood up, she said, “I offered to pays you, remember?”

I sighed. “You don’t need to give me anything. Hop in.” I opened the passenger door of the Mercedes for my guest. “I could use some company. Long drive and all.”

Bending down to get in the car, she paused, showing as much as her cleavage as possible without being too obvious. I happily noticed she was braless, but I turned away, pretending not to notice. “Wow, what a great ride man!” she said as she got in the passenger seat.

We drove off at just after one-thirty on that hot Friday afternoon. The sky was a deep cloudless blue that shimmered like heat rising off pavement. It was well past ninety already and the weather report said it should reach a hundred by later in the day. Jesus, I hated fucking July in Missouri.

For the first ten minutes or so, we rode in silence, Irene staring out the passenger window watching the world whip by while I stared at the hot blacktop in front of me. I was just about to ask her about her boyfriend when she said: “Yous don’t want to be goin’ where ya’s goin’ do you?” She was still staring out the passenger window. From this angle the King Cobra on the back of her neck was staring looking at me and in my mind’s eye I saw the reptile leap off her flesh, striking me in the face.

“W-what?” I asked, startled.

She turned and faced me, this young black woman, this drifter. “You is fidgeting, uncomfortable like. And the mores we keep drivin’, the mores you keep squirming, as if you is headin’ to your death or sumpin.”

And then it struck me why I had agreed to give her a ride. I didn’t want to be alone with my thoughts and figured that company would keep my mind off of going home. Irene was right: the closer I got to home, the more nervous I became. The sicker I felt.

“Maybe the death of my soul,” I whispered.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said.

We chatted about her boyfriend and how her father didn’t want to let his little girl grow up. Irene had the dream of becoming a singer and her boyfriend was in a band. He had just moved to Springfield a couple of weeks back and she was coming down to join him. They had big, big plans.

At a little after four, we pulled into a dirty, run-down apartment complex on the eastside of Springfield where Irene said her boyfriend was rooming with other band members. I dropped her off with the small suitcase she came with and wished her luck. I sat there in the parking lot and sadly watched this young woman walk off in pursuit of her dreams. After what seemed like an hour, I drove off in search of a motel. I didn’t want to deal with family tonight, or tomorrow for that matter.

I found a Motel 6 and got a room. After a dinner of fast food hamburgers and fries, I called my sister and let her know I would be down in the morning. “So it takes the death of our father to bring you home, huh Ethan?” she said when I called.

“No, the only reason I’m coming is to support you, not *him*. I don’t want you to have to walk through this alone.”

“Oh, cut the shit!” Hailey said. “You haven’t been here in over ten years, didn’t ever call me or Dad to see how we were and you have the fucking nerve to say that? You really are an asshole!” I could hear her crying softly. She was trying to hide it, to muffle the sounds as if she knew I would use it against her. Maybe I really was an asshole.

“Hailey, I’m sorry, really I am. I’ll be down tomorrow and we can patch things up okay?”

I was greeted with silence. “Hailey? Hailey, you there?” I heard the unmistakable sound of a dial tone. My only sister had hung up on me. But I didn’t blame her. I sighed and fell back on the bed in my dingy motel room, staring up at the water-stained ceiling, wondering how my life had ended up like this.

After a few hours of tossing and turning, I finally nodded off. I woke the next morning around six, disoriented and afraid, not remembering where I was for a minute or so. The remnants of the nightmare hung in my brain like dirty laundry and the more I tried to recall the dream, the more it faded. Soon it was gone completely. I showered and shaved and checked out just before eleven, giving the young female clerk a perfunctory smile.

Once I was back on the road, I turned on the car’s radio. I sang along with Tom Petty’s *Free Fallin’* and, for the first time, really listened to the lyrics: *I wanna free fall out into nothin’*,

gonna leave this world for awhile. And that is exactly how I felt; I wanted to leave this world, at least for a while.

About ten minutes from Dad's place, I pulled off Highway 13 onto a dusty dirt road that led down to the river. Back when I was a kid, Dad and I would come down to the river and the well-hidden watering hole where we would bathe after a hard days' work of bucking hay and tilling the earth. I pulled the now-dirty Mercedes behind some trees, well out of sight of the main road, and stepped into the blistering heat. It was pushing one hundred degrees. I sucked in the humid, thick air. My shirt became tacky as I began to sweat.

I slowly circled the landscape, my eyes searching for other signs of life, but found myself alone with the heat and my thoughts. I made my way through the brambles and overgrowth, ending up at the riverbank and the spot where my father used to take me. Here the river was about fifteen feet wide and perhaps four feet deep. It was still and smooth, more like a lake, but further downstream the current picked up again and the river narrowed, becoming shallow again. Branches overhung the banks, reaching out like fingers, blotting out the burning sun and bringing respite from the heat.

I bent down next to the overgrown foliage, lifted and pulled back the leaves of a cottonwood plant. Buried deep in the brush, just where I remembered, was an old camping coffee pot popular in the sixties. This metal contraption had a percolator bulb on top and the sides were charred black from use. I stripped off my sweat-soaked clothes, grabbed the pot from its burial ground and without further hesitation, I jumped in the freezing cold water, stifling a scream, the coffee pot clutched in my hand as if it were a life preserver.

The James River was fed from the melting mountain snowfall. The shock to my system was refreshing and, at the same time, debilitating. I filled the pot with icy river water and poured it over my head, like I had done with my father when he was alive. I poured another icy shot over my head, as if this mountain-fed stream would somehow purify my soul. I tossed the charred pot up onto the bank. I dunked myself then, as if I were being baptized.

When I came up for air, I heard a voice from behind me say: “Well if it isn’t Ethan Barkley! It sure has been a long time, what the hell are you doing here?” The female voice carried an unmistakable Ozark accent, a southern drawl.

I turned to see a woman in blue jean shorts and a t-shirt that said: *Guns Don’t Kill People, Dads With Pretty Daughters Kill People*. And she was pretty: her brown hair was shoulder length and she wore it straight, natural. She was about average height and build, but what struck me the most was her smile. She was grinning like a little kid getting ready for a birthday party. It lit up her whole face and made me forget where I was and, more importantly, why I was here.

I smiled too and began to walk out of the river when I realized I was nude. I stopped just as the water line dipped below my navel. “Um, could you please turn around, I...well...I’m not wearing anything.”

“No shit. Must be why these clothes are lying around, huh?” she said, snatching my boxers off the tree branch and twirling them around her index finger as if she were going to fling them as far away as possible. When she saw the look on my face, her smile got even bigger, if such a thing were possible. “Don’t worry Ethan, if you do what I say, I may give you these back.” She hesitated for a second, then added: “After I’m done with you, that is.”

I didn't know what to say. I couldn't believe she was standing right in front of me while I stood there, water dripping from my hair. I finally found my voice. "Hi Hannah. What are you doing down here?"

"That's all you can say after all these years? Really? How about I'm sorry for leaving you to fend for yourself in such a backward part of the world? I should have taken you with me, but I was too goddamn selfish to think--"

"Miss Flint, please. May I have my underwear?"

She laughed at that. "Miss Flint? Are you shittin' me Ethan? I know it's been a long time, but don't you remember the fun we used to have? Don't you remember what we did when we were teenagers during the summer--"

"Yes! I fucking remember and I don't want to talk about it!"

Startled, she stepped back, my plaid boxers still hanging limply from her left hand. The smile had been replaced by a frown and a look of concern that could easily be mistaken for fear, if one didn't know better. Hannah Flint didn't fear much in this world however, not after enduring the drunken beatings imposed on her years ago by her father. She had stood up to him, which no one else ever had, and finally got him put behind bars. She figured by the time he got out, she would be long gone. That had been ten years ago, in the summer of 1979, but she had only managed to get about five miles up the road from the place she was born. Her mother had died when she was a child. Leukemia, I think it was. She was now living with Grandma Levine, who was in her nineties.

"Jesus Ethan, I'm sorry for your loss, but you can't just keep running from your problems or your fears. Someday you have to face up to that shit or it's gonna kill you."

I walked out of the water before I died from hypothermia. My hands were cupped over my shriveled genitals and my nipples were so hard I could have cut diamonds with them. Hannah stood her ground, holding my boxers out in front of me like the mechanical rabbit greyhounds chase during a dog race. I sat down in a clearing a few feet from her, pulling my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around my legs. I was warming rapidly in the heat and I noticed that Hannah was sweating through her t-shirt, her breasts clinging nicely to the material, her nipples straining at the fabric.

She tossed me the boxers then and said, “Welcome home. I never thought I’d see you again. Why didn’t you ever call me? Hailey told me you never called her either. I guess I could understand not calling me, but your own sister?” she said shaking her head. She sighed and sat down next to me.

I didn’t bother to get dressed. Hardly anyone came down to this part of the river and...well... Hannah had seen it all before.

“Your Dad baptized people about a mile upstream,” Hannah said putting an arm around my shoulders. “He was a good man Ethan, he talked about you a lot. You really hurt him. I don’t understand why you blamed him for Kevin’s death. The police, the coroner, they all ruled it an accident. Everyone did. Everyone but you.”

“So did you just step in and take my place after I left?”

“It wasn’t his fault! Don’t you see? Can’t you get it? It was an accident, a fucking tragic accident!”

“Maybe.”

“What the hell are you babbling about?”

“Look Hannah, I don’t think my dad had any right to put that rifle in Kevin’s hands. He was only fifteen, just a kid. And my best friend.”

“Peter was teaching him how to hunt because Kevin asked him to. And where were you anyway?”

“I was...”

“Yeah, I know where you were. You were up in Springfield hanging out with a bunch of idiots getting drunk and fucking around because you were pissed off at your dad or sister or somebody for one reason or another. You really were a rebel Ethan.”

I just stared at her, my mouth hanging open like I’d just suffered a seizure. “So what’s your part in this...why do you care?”

She removed her arm from my shoulders and stood up, looking down at me now. I felt small, inconsequential and I wanted to crawl in the bushes and hide. “Because I was crazy about you but you were so wrapped up in yourself you couldn’t see what was happening.” She got real quiet then and spoke barely above a whisper: “I’m still crazy about you...”

I looked up at her and then I did something I hadn’t done in over a decade. I cried. And not just a little, but so much and so hard that I didn’t think I would ever stop. The floods came as I mourned the loss of my best friend Kevin, the loss of my Mother over twenty years ago, the loss of my father and the loss of my ability to love.

Perhaps I could regain that last one.

Hannah was standing over me, watching as I sat next to the river, crying like a toddler who can't find his mother. Snot hung from my nose. My eyes were puffy and swollen. I must have cried for ten minutes or more, but when I finally stopped I felt clean, as if a part of me – the corrupt, angry part – had finally died.

Without a word, I got up and dressed.

“You okay?” Hannah asked quietly.

“Yes...yes, I think I am,” I replied smiling at this wonderful woman from my past. “Hey Hannah?”

“Yeah?”

“You think I can be a brother to my sister? You think I can make things up to her?”

“Dunno. But I do know one thing.”

“What's that?”

“You should try, Ethan. You should try.”

I nodded, took her by the hand.

I was going home.