4,993 Words

SEPTEMBER MONEY

The road isn't muddy, but the deep pools of rainwater in the ruts are quite frankly starting to get on my nerves. The thing is, we have only ourselves to blame. The national forest is hardly the place for the old mail and laundry delivery trucks we use for the company, and we've been camping here for almost a month. Things are starting to decay, sag, smell, rust, rip, and vanish. Some things are holding up, like the vivid whitewater rafting scenes and our telephone number that we just had freshly printed on the side of our old school bus.

Still, our rigs are half-rusted and barely clinging to life, and they are not even as old as I am. It's a sobering thought—I'm now closer to seventy than to sixty—and nothing about me is usually all that sober. I never even felt old until I watched the City of Seattle dynamite the Kingdome live on TV. I comforted myself by thinking that the Mariner's twenty-two seasons of mediocrity was probably enough to warrant the government's explosives. I lost that comfort quickly when I realized that similar bureaucrats would be influencing my own fate once I signed up for Medicare. I decided right there that I would try to avoid government provision for as long as possible.

So, I'm not dead, and not quite *broke* either—at least in the fiscal sense. I've survived another August, and this is when the money really dries up for most "professional" raft guides. Let's face it, most river rats really can't sock away money like I can. One time I handed Carter (his river name is Tweety, and I don't remember the backstory) a naked cardboard toilet paper roll and said, "You dropped your wallet." But now it's September, and that means dirtbags,

drifters, and of all sorts of whitewater carnies have descended on the little Tieton River, where the Rimrock Reservoir drops a little water weight off on the dry Yakima Valley below, and where we can all make some of that September money.

Here, on this third weekend since the dam opened, I'm nursing a sore shoulder, but that's my little secret. It's almost dusk, and my community is busy with preparations for a signature party tomorrow night. Well, it's not just a party to us. We are in our own way a religious bunch—meaning that we are busy with sacred things at all times—if by *sacred* one understands the kind of bacchanalian liturgies I have in mind. Outsiders and unbelievers, however, are at a perfectly safe and sanitary distance from all of it. I promise.

Being creatures of tradition, a toga was once the required garment for our little soiree in the forest, but unfortunately a great and sinful laxity has set in. Come as you are, we now sing. Just bring five dollars or a bottle or something in pill form; you can keep your appearance humbly tatterdemalion. For now, we are just setting things up. I've been asked to help construct a border fence out of twinkle lights, so no freeloaders can disrupt our free-loving. With my good arm, I've worked all the way past to where the second generator was wheeled, right next to the white foldup deejay table. There is only one section left to block, but there seems to be a lot of used toilet paper in the vicinity, so I opted to sit down, job still incomplete. Maybe no one will notice. I don't believe in borders anyway (and I need a drink).

Lisa is here, and her ruggedly attractive face is almost eye level with mine from my chair. Her *I Heart Bacon* hat is so large that it takes her thick mess of hair to keep it from sinking over her eyes. Lisa's river name is "the Terminator," but she reviles us for it. Curt in speech, she also rarely smiles or shows emotion. "I do not like that," she would say, and we felt we needed only to gesture to an imaginary audience to demonstrate the appropriateness of her river name.

Labels aren't for everyone, or if you prefer a high brow way thinking about it: the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, said that naming is an act of negation. But raft guides don't care much for intellectualism. Our beliefs and practices emerge through our own implied social contract. One rule is that guides cannot create their own river name. Yes, I have one too, which I also resisted. I was christened "Big Chill Will." It was a lazy appellation, which stuck primarily just because *chill* rhymed with *Will*, and with support from the fact that I was once a surfer.

I don't like strangers calling me by my river name. It's not one of our rules, but I think it's a solid candidate. I've already developed a grievance because of it. I was offended by this part-time guide we call New Guy (shortened to just *Guy*), and he really rubbed me the wrong way back when I first met him:

"When was your rookie year, *Big Chill*?"

I gave a sarcastic smile. "1974 on the American River down in Cali."

"Did you get to see any real carnage?"

I nodded subtly. "Yeah—Watergate."

Guy squinted at me. Probably thinking—*That's how this is going to be, eh Big Chill?* But, he wasn't rude.

"Wow. 1974. I wasn't even born until the nineties."

OK, maybe a little rude at the end. It's been five years since that happened and I still don't like him. Surprised?

Who else is here?

Carter is taking a break from it all too (when is Carter not taking a break?). He's on a camp chair with his e-cigarette, flicking his sandy hair out of his eyes. He's wearing a poncho with a gawdy amount of garishly displayed Mardi Gras beads. He has put on break-away Adidas

pants over his ripped denim shorts. Red-faced Jim “Boss” Haag is also here, laboring to get comfortable in his chair. The name says it all. He’s in charge, and he has been for years. He’s been tending to the fire while we worked on setting things up for tomorrow.

Haag’s got his own dinner out: a box of cold fried chicken and two Rainiers. He’s offering one to me. It would be rude to say no, but I really should not have one. There is nothing worse than the aftertaste of Rainier, and you must believe me that I do not say that out of snobbery. In fact, you would have to drive back across the mountains to find a functioning snob. As for me, I have a sixpack of Olympia on hand, and I am keeping it securely hidden for the time being because Guy and his buddies have started moving in on our little seating area. They appear to be empty handed, but they did bring a guitar.

He was hanging around, I’m sure, to try to pick up more work with us. The occasional shift wasn’t good enough. He had not impressed me, and I had concluded that, objectively speaking, he was not fit to be a permanent member of our team. I thought I could see a hunger in his eyes as he sat with face illuminated by our fire. More than any other temptation, I knew the look well. He was hungry for that elusive September money.

River guides, as part of the dirtbag genus, follow an annual cycle much like any hibernating animal, but with nut collection taking place mostly in the summer. Fall could be tricky. Winter hibernation for me always meant the desert. As I have aged, I really have taken on avian characteristics, venturing further south and all that. The number of sub-freezing nights I could tolerate has begun to shrink over time. Tucson was now the end of the line for me. Even there, on the cold nights, the last thing I would see as I turned out the light in the back of my truck was my own breath.

I thought of winter hibernation as an opportunity to let my normal world heal in my absence. But in characters like Guy I only saw greedy opportunism. And I wouldn't say it unless it absolutely had to be said. I feel that I am not a camel who has to pass through the eye of the needle. I can see the matter objectively thanks to training from Professor J.G. Dunning:

"Greed, my little children of the sun, is taking more than you need."

Freshman philosophy class, 1973.

Dunning's hand was just hovering there, quivering from all that caffeine (could have been lithium though). The smoke from his cigarettes created a haze right around his generously unlatched paisley shirt. I can still see his arm straight, almost pointing right at me, as he dramatized the moral message of Epictetus' metaphor of a banquet.

"Greed is reaching out," he said, "for what has not been passed to you."

The alternative was leisure suit *Lebensphilosophie,* and I opted for it by dropping out of college and becoming an outdoor guide—rafting, hiking in national parks—I thought I was a true radical. Dunning saw me years later when he came to visit Yosemite and I had moved back to California to work there for the summer. Somehow, he remembered me. How the hell did he even see me or any of us behind all that smoke?

"Martenson! You never took my advanced classes."

I told him that I learned his freshman philosophy lessons a little too well.

That era is over, but here we are still free spirits, young and old together, like Plato's androgynous figure of love, but in a generational sense. Haag and I the elders, Lisa and Carter our apprentices. That is how I thought it was going to be until Jesus came, or the biosphere disintegrated, or I just dropped dead while watering an old Ponderosa in the middle of the night.

There's laughter. Carter can't control himself, and now he's coughing. A deep guttural cough. Now his head almost hangs in shame.

"Someone, take it."

He held the joint now with two hands, solemn, serious, reverential. He was protecting it like sacred fire in the hands of a shaman.

Some rookie guide from Wild Ride Rafting who had drifted over to our camp with Guy helped himself to it. Scavengers, vultures, all of them. Haag now produced a shiny stainless-steel flask from the pocket of his camouflaged hunting jacket. He was in boots and thick socks, but even at night he wore gym shorts, which exposed stout legs with muscle definition—muscles that almost imprisoned the lower leg bones—and these contours and lines had not faded despite his aging, blotchy skin.

Lisa had offered to cook for Carter and I for tonight, and she was chopping an onion and wiping her cheeks with her orange puffy coat sleeves. On the right sleeve there was a discernable patch covering a tear in its outer layer.

"Everyone okay with onion in their chili?"

Carter craned his neck and stared at her. "I like as much as you want to put in."

"Where'd you get that onion?" I asked.

Lisa stopped her chopping and winced. "I bought it in Naches this morning, Will. There are these things called stores."

I gave my best look of satisfaction.

"I got the chili at the store too."

I hushed her gently with my hands.

"I don't care about anything in a can. You could tell me that you found it at the bottom of the river and I'd be fine."

"Now, Will here is a true dirt bag," Haag said chuckling.

I got out of my chair and rubbed my hands together. I towered over her by a foot at least with my tall skinny frame.

"How much does all of this cooking set me back?"

"A sixpack of Oly should be plenty."

I wanted to negotiate a little. "How about one can?"

Without waiting for her answer, I reached for an Oly from the protected spot under my camp chair. As I gripped the can, I suddenly and awkwardly switched arms. It drew attention to my body, more medical than sexual I'm afraid.

"What's bugging your right arm, Will?" Haag asked, shifting his weight in his chair over toward me slowly for inspection. He crossed his legs, which left his large calf muscle completely flexed.

Guy stopped playing his guitar. It was at that moment that I knew everything was different, in a way that my high school science teacher had explained entropy. The old social contract was breaking down. When that happens, there's reversion to lower complexity, and to hard and fixed rules of nature: predator and prey, fight and flight, war of all against all.

"Just taking care of my shoulder," I said as I stood back up. "I take care of it, and it takes care of me."

"That's your *right* shoulder, ain't it," Haag said, not backing down.

"Your eyes are still working, boss," I said.

It was quiet for a moment, except for the background noise from the other campers and there was the chopping sound of Lisa's knife. Haag had neglected the fire, and in its fragile state it started to wither and fade. Our one source of heat now enervated by complacency; a coolness set in between us until Haag saw my disgruntled face. As I made small talk with Lisa by the stove, we heard the decisive snap of hatchet meeting wood.

After fueling the fire, Haag changed the tone of things.

"Tomorrow is a double. First float is a youth group. Some Baptist church. Three boats. Second shift is three separate families."

"How young are the churchies?" asked Carter.

"Young teens mostly. Twelve, thirteen-ish."

"Well—"

"What's the order?" Lisa asked, talking over me.

"I want Tweety to lead," he said. Then he paused and dramatically stared at my shoulder. "Then Big Chill," he continued, "Then you, Lisa, as sweep."

We all knew why he delivered it like this: the weakest guide always goes in the middle. I normally would not have cared (hell, with three solid guides we rotated the order all the time), but he had to make a big deal out of staring at my shoulder. Deep in that little rational Jiminy Cricket part of my brain, I knew he made the right call. I wanted to believe that this had nothing to do with that usurper Guy hanging around more and more, but we Bodhisattvas see connections in the universe that others miss. I have eyes of the soul, you see. Yet, this was still for the best: our lives and the lives of our customers are on the line out there, and they were all taking care of me, but it hurt.

My thoughts were eventually disturbed by the centrifugal forces that were spontaneously launching us into what could only be called the Penultimate Party. As darkness took us into the void of night, the scene had almost become carnivalesque. More guides started pouring into our camp from up the road. There were private boaters too, some I knew, but there were newcomers as well. They must have heard we always had extra beer. I tried to remain aloof from most of them, but I couldn't resist putting on a little show for some of the ladies by constantly stretching my shoulder. When I saw them take notice, I exaggerated a wincing look.

"You should try cupping," one of them said.

In my coquettish way, I presented a face of mischief, and they giggled.

In the morning, Lisa divided up the youth group paddlers while Haag and I set up the shuttle vehicle. She placed the youth pastor in my crew, along with four distracted young teenagers. The pastor was the only adult going on the river today, and she had given him to me. It was another message: they didn't have faith in me. I made the most of it. I placed him up front and on the opposite side of me. I always guided from the rear right. This balancing of adult weight and strength would make life a little easier. I tried to train them quickly, and that meant inculcating Socratic ignorance. When it comes to rivers, it is best to be teachable, and only awareness of one's ignorance opens up the possibility of learning.

"What happens if someone falls in?" I asked.

"Jump in after them," said one of the kids.

"That would just double the number of people in need," I said firmly.

The pastor cracked a smile. He wasn't too talkative though. Maybe he was here because he drew some kind of short straw. I studied him carefully. His smart glasses told me that he had

higher ambitions. That he wanted respect in his little corner of the universe. He wasn't the first church leader to sit in my boat. I had taken several. They were all similar in dress, and trying to act so much younger than their age.

"You might lose those," I said, pointing to his trendy glasses and ball cap.

We had been practicing in a deep eddy right offshore.

"Show me what you should do when I say 'forward'."

They started to smack the water with their paddles. Blades cut in haphazardly. It was all out of rhythm. It was all so predictable.

"Try to get in sync. You two in the front—I was talking to the pastor and the biggest kid—try to mirror each other's movements. Lean forward together, paddle in, pull back with your whole body."

They tried again. Better. The kids behind them were oblivious to the system.

"Keep those blades straight up and down."

If I could just train up the pastor and his neighbor, then I might not have to use my shoulder at all. A lazy guide can easily use the crew to steer the boat as well as to motor it (and I had a medical excuse for laziness). Simply call one side to paddle and not the other. Younger guides are often too cocky to use the crew; they want to steer it themselves with draw and pry strokes. But I had to be careful. I had to look like I was guiding normally but keep the pressure off my body. We can't have people getting paid without working—not in this country!

OK, we are off.

There is something devious about the way in which the reservoir water covers up the sharp basalt rocks; vicious, ruthless, jagged, all under the surface of that happy water, lapping sound off its back. It was almost unnatural that they should be hidden in this way. Technological

humanity had made the river a machine. We made it flow for our own purposes: agricultural, recreational, whatever.

I had foolishly allowed us to drift toward a grassy island between the channels, where the water was even shallower. There were a number of small basalt rocks submerged off its shore. With just one small and avoidable bump, a little Baptist boy tumbled into the river and was flushed away down the wrong channel.

His was the middle channel, the shortest of the three. It was too narrow for our boat, and logs were strewn merely two or so feet above its ripples. Due to inequities of length, he beat us to the deep pool before the diversion dam by about fifteen seconds. Lisa saw all of it, and had blown her whistle even before I did, though I saw little use in doing so since recovery of the swimmer would fall on me, there being no other alternative as Carter had likely already dropped over it. Then there was the noise: the highway, the obstreperous dam itself. My crew was oblivious to the danger ahead. They excitedly shouted and pointed, though we lost sight of him as we took the longer, L-shaped channel to the left.

His *Heilsgeschichte* is as follows: he was on the straight, narrow path, and we had the elbow in the way, the joint between segments of greater overall length. He swam in shallow, wet intoxication, stiff, starfish like, drunk on adrenaline. When we set on reconciliation, with boat fixed in the right ferry angle, he was on his belly thrashing toward us. I put them to work paddling, aiming to cut him off before the drop. I had the time to rotate my body so that I could grab him with my left arm, but I didn’t. I used my right. Decades of guiding produces habits that are not easily changed, and the pain when I tore the rotator cuff in my bad shoulder taught me how foolish that was.

The pain took me into my own little world, and for a moment I forgot about the kid, who was now possibly on his way to Jesus. His friends, likely confused by why I let him go, took action for themselves, though they were laughing as they helped him in. They were all, including the pastor, likely ignorant of what rivers can do. They had never seen a rafter pinned up against a bridge pillar or pushed into a nest of logs and tree branches, a strainer we call it; no, they had never seen what I had.

We dropped over the dam awkwardly, but without further drama.

"What would have happened if we didn't help?" one asked.

The pastor didn't want to look ignorant. "It was a very low dam," he said, lowering his voice to sound authoritative. "Not all that bad, I think." He looked back at me for affirmation.

The need to conceal my pain kept me from condescending to point out that the opposite was true, that low overhead dams are deadly—far deadlier than a higher, say twenty-foot drop into a nice deep pool. In an hour it was all over. We loaded them into our moribund bus. The pastor saw me debriefing with Lisa and Carter by the river's edge. He knew what we were discussing and came over and tried to assure us that there would be no complaint on his end. I was almost moved by his little speech, and I committed right then and there in my head to say a prayer for him some day, that God might give him a raise, or seven children, or better sermon illustrations.

He left us with a joke. "You know, we Baptists have a thing for water."

Scratch that, I will pray for better jokes.

We all tried to laugh, but Carter and Lisa looked confused. Probably unchurched—both of them. At least I was raised better. Was it not I who had studied for one year at Berkeley? But intellectually I fell short when it came to preparing to answer to the boss, and I do not mean God.

My boss was not a spirit in the sky, but a truly corporeal (and some might say corpulent) being. But the analogy is not completely meretricious. Like our omniscient, foreknowing heavenly father, Haag would somehow know what I had done without having to ask.

All I could do though was think about how this all affected me. I was going to fall about one thousand dollars short now. It meant I would have to stay put once I reached the Bureau of Land Management camping near Tucson. It meant fewer drives into town or drives to my favorite hiking trails. It would be gas money that I didn't have. No beer. No warm meals. Just my books and my journals and the cold desert nights where I would wrap an old blanket around my sleeping bag and just survive the dark until the warm sun obliterates the icy shadows.

I could deal. It was only one winter. The fear was whether the shoulder injury was just the beginning of the end. The pressure it put on Boss Haag to replace me. No more September money. No more *any* kind of money. I didn't want to face him. I feared the inevitable paternalistic talk about Medicare. Jobs with benefits. Maybe I could meet and greet shoppers in a warehouse somewhere. Slowing down. Sleeping in a bed. Acting my age. Getting that *real* job. But that would be the fate of the greedy, and am I one of their company? What are my sins? I have fired no one. I may have helped myself to a few too many complimentary soup crackers, but I am no Gordon Gecko. I felt I deserved my winter in the south of no work and pleasant solitude. Had I not earned a small place in the sun?

When we returned, it was not Haag's gray beard that caught my eye. In a chair by the fire, Guy's wry smile was waiting for me. It was now the face of consummation. Satiated and content. Without a word between him, me, or our river boss, he looked at his watch, turned an eye toward the gathering pool of new customers waiting to be outfitted by the company van and walked over there curiously. Lisa intercepted him on the way, and for a moment I thought that

her face betrayed an emotion, some confusion. She was going to send him away, maybe send him to the store to get us more beer. Maybe.

We had worked together for so long, Lisa, Carter, and I. Over ten years. Everything was predictable until now. She was giving him information; her hands were moving the way a preacher or professor would talk. Her face was as expressionless as always. She pointed at me, and Guy looked my way and then turned back when he saw me staring at him. Haag left his seat at the table and came to where I was standing by the river, just a few yards from the inner circle of chairs around the firepit. It almost looked like he was smiling too.

"Maybe you should take a seat," he said.

I climbed inside the extra raft that was fully parked on the beach by the put-in. Sitting down on the front thwart with my legs tightly together and back erect, I must have looked like a petulant schoolboy to him. Waiting for my lesson, my head began to sag forward. Haag was still just standing there as I waited, baffled, searching for a smoke that was supposed to be in the front pocket of his plaid flannel shirt. He furrowed his brow and kept taping around his body with his thick pallid hands.

"Oh the hell with it."

His tone hinted of both anger and exhaustion, but his smile would return at times as if he had forgotten the point of the lecture.

"Finding it hard to remember things these days boss?"

The insulting question was delivered simultaneously with my left arm raised up, mockingly academic, trying to give my insolence an air of legitimacy, as if a slur had been uttered in a formal tone or with an upper-class accent. The effect was a sudden return of memory for Haag and a sanctimonious ring to his voice.

"You know, someone could have gotten hurt out there because of you."

I did not know why he needed to say what we both already knew. I hated to see him this way probably as much as he hated to see me in my state. I waved his line of thought off with my left hand. Haag gingerly squatted down on the outer chamber of the raft.

"I know this is hard for you to hear, Will, but—"

I cut him off. "How about L&I? Isn't that hard for *you* to hear, boss?"

His face was imperturbable. "What ever happened to your principles, Will? You were so radical once. Is that really how you want this to end?"

"What—our *business* relationship?" I asked contemptuously.

"You're acting like a child now. You're not seeing things clearly. I saw you—we all saw you nursing your shoulder earlier. I asked if anything was wrong, and you denied it. There were witnesses, Will. I've already talked to the team about it, so don't try to pull that crap with me."

I sat in silence. My luck had run out. I thought I could make it through this month. This year. Next year too maybe.

"Fortunately, we have someone who can cover your next shift. I've been thinking about bringing Jake on full time next year. He's always been patient and willing to help us."

I thought: "Jake? Who's Jake?"

Guy started coming toward me.

Wait—Jake is Guy? *New Guy*?

Without a word he picked up his gear and the guide paddle that he had stored in the back of the dormant raft and walked back toward the van. His normally desultory stride had been replaced with a walk of confidence, as if a lawyer had announced his name at the reading of a

family will and he was collecting his inheritance. His faded-red floatation vest was strung over his back, and on it I saw the equally faded black permanent marker lettering of JAKE P.

In all these years—though I admit that five years felt like one to me—I had never noticed what was right on the surface. I didn't even know his name! He had worn that vest every time he worked for us, but it was like I was seeing it for the first time or with new eyes. Haag gave my back a tap.

"Forty-four years on the river is enough, don't you say, Will?"

"Forty-five," I said.

I felt like an asshole. I had never given Guy—Jake, that is—much of a chance. All I could do now was nod in his direction and hope that eventually someone would give him a proper river name—someone who actually deserved to give him one.