

## BY THE RIVER

The train spanned the rusted length of the short bridge, grimacing smoke. Halfway across it halted abruptly and blared its horn. A thick arm spat out of an oriel between cars. Flung out a dull object into the river below.

After a moment of indecision, the train sounded another blast and swept on again, disappearing behind a bend where the tracks cut through a mountainside of pine.

The two boys had seen the object drop into the rapids from a sandbar about ten yards off.

Did you see that? the red-haired boy asked.

I'm staring at where you're staring at, Robert said.

Robert was fourteen and sullen and hated this scorched region that was perpetually autumnal. He didn't like his uncle, nor that his uncle was a fisherman and killed fish for sport. Especially because his uncle never invited him along to kill fish.

But he liked the red-haired boy.

What was it? the red-haired boy asked.

Since the red-haired boy vanished whenever Robert fronted the path leading up the hill to his uncle's home, he assumed him to be a figment of his waning childhood, an invisible acquaintance who would shuffle back into his brain once his brain was older. An invisible

friend was one you had to concoct from nothing, and Robert had put no effort into creating this one; he'd never an invisible friend before and he couldn't determine whether this was how it was supposed to be.

Robert kept glancing towards his uncle's house, hoping that his uncle wasn't watching. His uncle forbade him from playing on the sandbars, since he could easily fall into the river and drown and be carried into the next county or further.

When the train's huffing was muted there was no noise, except for the pounding of the river, which was nothing to Robert but an interpretation of silence.

Dangling their legs into the water, Robert and the red-haired boy shared the quiet between them. The cottonwoods trembled lazily in the weak breeze. On the eastern bank, small trees of contrasting thickness were surrounded by wire. Park Service officers were reforesting the burned out flatlands. Sometimes from the back window in the kitchen, Robert could see the woman in the green uniform get out of her green pickup truck and wander among the diminutive trees, making notes in a black notebook with a short pencil. The woman only stayed for fifteen minutes at any one time, and she never raised her head from the task. Once he'd borrowed his uncle's binoculars for the task. She was pretty, Robert thought. Even though had not seen her face.

What do you think it was that fell into the water? the red-haired boy asked.

Maybe it wasn't nothing.

It was something.

It might have been a piece of the train.

But it was something. A piece of the train is interesting. You saw it. Man threw it out of the train. Why would a man throw something out of a train less it was important for it to be lost?

I'm not sure, Robert said. I think I saw something.

Yeah, the red-haired boy said.

The sky was so bright and so blue it was painful to keep one's eyes open for very long.

Rising quickly the red-haired boy started off towards the bridge, slapping water into the air with his heels, wading the river in his bare feet. Robert righted himself and to keep his balance on the smoothed rocks he had to pause every few feet and clench his teeth against the concentrated hurt of keeping his balance in the roiling cold.

Where is it? the red-haired boy shouted.

We don't know what it is.

It must be important if we can't find it.

Or it's down the river by now.

The trestles supporting the old bridge were green with algae. The frigid current was a fierce gentleness on Robert's legs, tugging him relentlessly back like a thousand small hands pulling at his cuffs.

Little crests caught the sunlight as he paddled his arms through the waist-high water.

Here it is, the red-haired boy said.

What's here? Robert said, slogging to the middle of the river.

It's right here, the red-haired boy said, leaning over a rock and pointing down.

It was a wallet, pressed flat and closed, into a jutting rock.

Robert snatched up the slack leather article and turned it over in his wet hands. With their combined hands they went through the wallet, flipped it upside down, shook the papery leather. The wallet was empty.

Take it home, the red-haired boy said.

The red-haired boy had subdued blue eyes like Robert and an identical lack of smile. Robert had not asked about his childhood because the red-haired boy was imaginary and Robert did not think that imaginary boys had childhoods, and if they did then those childhoods had to be imaginary as well. Still, he wondered if it was similar to his own and he hoped that it was. Robert liked him.

He stuck the wallet in the back pocket of his jeans, and shook the red-haired boy's hand. His hand felt like a real hand.

Bring it back with you tomorrow, the red-haired boy said.

Robert climbed out of the river and onto the bank. The eroded soil of the wetland was held secure by burlap, and the fabric was relenting

underfoot. He shivered as he trudged the hill to his yellow house. He looked back at the river and the red-haired boy was lifting the big rock that had stopped the wallet from being channeled downstream. Perhaps it was the peculiar glint of a cold sun, but when the boy waved at Robert his body was washed out by the glare and looked exactly like a crouched shadow.

His uncle was in a plaid fabric armchair watching a sitcom. The curtains were drawn. Except for the television the split-level was dark. Clenched in the space between his legs was a bottle of Everclear that he kept pressing his nose against.

Hey, his uncle said without shifting from the television. Where you been this whole afternoon?

By the river, Robert said.

I saw you by the river, he said, and there were tones in his voice that implied more than his normal tone.

I was just by the river doing nothing much.

Yeah, his uncle said.

They ate a dinner of hotdogs and coleslaw by the strobe light of the television screen.

After a silent dinner Robert was in his basement room rifling through the wallet. He flipped it over and over in his hands, thumbed through the milky slots where pictures of relatives or children should have been. He wished it were not empty. Had it been filled with credit

cards and money and IDs he could have traced its owner and mailed it to him. Instead, it was probably just unwanted. The owner had gotten a new wallet and didn't need this one and had chucked it off a momentarily stationary train. But why not merely toss it in a garbage? was one question Robert had.

He stuffed the wallet under his pillow and opened a comic. There was nothing appealing in the manic colors, so he put the comic aside and took out the wallet again. It was still wet and the leather was staining his fingers. He was frustrated with himself for not knowing, or for not knowing enough.

Hearing his uncle's softly clomping boots on the stairs, he quickly put the wallet back under the pillow and pretended that he was doing nothing.

Who was that boy? his uncle asked from the shaded doorway.

What boy?

Who was that boy you were talking to by the river?

Robert was unaware that adults, too, could see his apparition.

I don't know his name, Robert said.

I was watching you two through my binoculars. Who was that boy?  
I've never seen him here.

He didn't say, Robert said.

Robert's uncle was gray-haired and morose. He stood with his hands hidden behind him. When his uncle spoke his grim, light-hued eyes

flickered around, as if he were staring at the words hanging out of his mouth.

That boy looks familiar though, his uncle said. Boy looks a lot like you. And besides, what did you find in the river?

I didn't find anything.

There was something you found in the river. What did you find in the river? You bent and found something right there. I saw it.

I was cleaning dirt off my hands, Robert said, and remembered that he must not show his hands because of the leather smears on them.

Robert's uncle put his lips together as though he were preparing to whistle.

Are you warm down here? he asked. It's getting on to winter. The first leaf fell today. I caught it in my hand.

I'm not cold, Robert said.

And you did not find anything in the river? Because.

Robert shook his head.

When his uncle had ascended out of his bedroom, Robert crawled deeper into the blankets. It was not cold in the room, but Robert always felt chills at night. He took the wallet out again and it was still empty.

The red-haired boy did not show up at the river in the morning.

Robert kept the wallet in his pocket all that day. He sprawled, gazing at the cloudless sky, on the sandbar. He had abandoned his

sneakers there the day he encountered the wallet, and now he slipped them back on. If he wasn't expecting the red-haired boy then maybe the red-haired boy would come. His uncle said they resembled each other. Robert didn't think he'd ever looked like anyone, and he was starting not to look like himself, either. He would be fifteen in May. Right now he was just almost fifteen and he did not appreciate being almost anything.

Where are you? Robert asked the red-haired boy.

A plump moon had been visible in the ocean-blue above. It was just a premature idea of nightfall, and Robert was fond of the idea that an idea could be there waiting for you.

At four-thirty he awoke from a startling dream about the wallet. The moon had scattered into disintegrated puffs of whitish haze, had eloped to the eastern horizon, and he realized that it was not the moon, but a moon-shaped cloud. He wanted to cry. He did not know how to cry. He was crying before he knew what he was doing.

Where are you? he said again.

Who am I talking to? he said through stupid tears.

His uncle was at the dinner table already, his elbows on the table like he was midway through some bland prayer. In front of him was a small chicken cooked to a shiny glaze, two rolls and a harmonica. Occasionally he played the harmonica, but only improvised songs and



only at the end of dinner. Usually the harmonica simply remained within reach. Harmonica music infuriated Robert. This particular harmonica had been in the family since Robert didn't know when. But a while.

You haven't eaten at all today, his uncle said.

I had some huckleberries.

You can have some supper if you tell me who that boy was.

I'm not hungry.

I am only *asking* because I would like to know.

I do not know.

I think you know.

Robert bowed his head. A plate of chicken slices and a roll was slid across to him.

After eating Robert's uncle took up the harmonica and began to blow something sad and nostalgic, staring over his hands at his nephew, the grease from the meal flying out of the instrument.

Later Robert put the wallet in a box of family photographs. On the lid of the box he'd cut four holes. The dead need to breath, too, his uncle had told him.

He slept little and his dreams concerned the red-haired boy and the bridge and every time the wallet fell into the river behind his eyelids it was irretrievably lost.

Robert and his uncle were having cereal at eight the next morning

when the police officer knocked at the screen door.

A boy has gone missing, the officer said to Robert's uncle. He lived three houses down from you. The boy did. And his family. His family is worried. They don't know where the boy is or where he could be.

Robert stood behind his uncle.

The officer said, Maybe you could have seen something that would help us. It would help us if you could, you know.

The man in the uniform seemed unduly nervous. Possibly his first case, Robert thought. He was mustached and hatless and his eyebrows met in the center of his forehead. The officer shoved a tiny photograph at Robert's uncle. Robert's uncle's free hand dropped to his side.

I have not seen this boy, his uncle said. He's probably concealed in these woods hereabouts.

Yes, he is either doing that or he is dead by the river, the officer said sharply. Or he is somewhere else entirely. The officer paused. Confusion masked his tan face. But I am sure he is in the woods hereabouts, he said.

It must be that, Robert's uncle said.

Well, and the officer backed off. Hang on to that picture and if you happen to match the boy call his folks because they're suffering. The officer was at his vehicle.

This is horrible, the officer said. And I wish I were not the one responsible for it.

The patrol car reversed out of the gravel driveway. Only as the car sped off did Robert's uncle lower his eyes to Robert and hold the photograph out to him.

Where is this boy? he asked.

The red-haired boy in the photograph was leaning on a brand new bicycle.

You've never been angry about anything, Robert said.

I have never felt anger before and I don't know how to use it right. Are you going to tell me?

But I don't know.

But you do know.

Robert's uncle left him at the door looking at the picture. Sighing tiredly he sat in his armchair. Within seconds he was whistling the song he had played earlier on the harmonica. Robert went downstairs and stuck the photograph in the wallet he and the red-haired boy had found. He did not stir from his room the entire day. Twice his uncle came down the stairs and stood outside his door breathing, his anger a frothing presence, and after a minute or two he would creak back up the stairs.

A frosted can of beer showing his uncle's fingerprints was on the

coffee table. His uncle was wearing a red baseball cap and his eyes were filled with something Robert didn't want to look at. It was two in the afternoon and he had been fishing. He motioned him to sit beside him on the couch with his tackle-box, then he leaned and sniffed at the aperture on the beer. He didn't drink the beer. He said he didn't drink anything anymore, and that just the yeasty smell going into his nose was enough to help him never drink again.

Robert sat at the far end of the hard couch.

Who was that boy? his uncle asked.

Robert instinctively reached for the wallet in the waistband of his blue sweatpants.

Nobody, Robert said.

What were you doing out there with him?

I wasn't doing anything. I was just out there.

Robert's uncle closed his eyes and shook his head. The lines on either side of his nostrils were like trenches, and the sound that he gave off was close to a whimper. Robert did not know his behavior right now.

He's *missing*, his uncle half-shouted. You heard that he is missing? And you were the last probably to see him. This is serious and you are not being serious. Where did he go? Where did that boy go?

Robert scratched his palms with his fingers, a habit he had whenever he was nervous or around his uncle too long.

Where did he *go*? his uncle said.

He didn't go anywhere, Robert said.

Well, he must have gone somewhere because he is gone and he is not here, is he?

He didn't go anywhere, Robert said. I saw him go nowhere. I saw him go nowhere.

Then Robert's uncle shut himself into silence. Robert was nearing the staircase when his uncle said to the room, Those goddamn leaping trout. And his silence was complete.

Robert dreamed of what his uncle had once told him about the leaping trout.

From the bridge Robert watched the Park Service woman bend down on one knee and jot something with her pencil. All he could make out was a bunch of brown hair underneath her cap. She may have been pretty. Robert thought she was pretty, but he didn't like wasting his thoughts on girls.

There was a poster on one beam of the bridge with the red-haired boy's face on it, and the words MISSING underneath. Why anyone would tape a poster where no one could see it was something Robert wasn't sure about. He peeled the black and white photo from the metal, folded it several times, and tucked it into his wallet. A good place for the picture, he thought.

His uncle had gone into town for a fresh six-pack to smell and a screwdriver because his screwdriver had snapped. Robert took the binoculars hurriedly from the fruit hook in the kitchen.

The ranger got into the green pickup and followed a road out into the woods that wound around the nearest mountain. Robert's uncle had taken him on that dust-kicked road looking for huckleberries on the naked mountainsides.

Every once in a while the sun glinted off the green pickup in the dense spruce trees midway to the summit.

Robert waited for the red-haired boy and the red-haired boy did not come. Two weeks had passed and the red-haired boy had not come. Robert missed him. He missed him as an imaginary friend and not as a person, because he still did not think that he was a person.

On a glade far above, the pickup ground to a stop in a bald-spot of trees, and Robert lifted the binoculars again. The woman ran out of the vehicle and left the door ajar. A small pile of something lay on the dirt road, and she gathered the pile in her arms. Robert saw her face clearly now, and it was a mess of agony. In her arms Robert caught a glint of red hair as she loaded the red-haired boy into the passenger seat, spun the pickup around, and throttled back down the mountain.

Robert let the binoculars yank on his neck.

He did not want to think about this.

It was colder today, the first tinge of winter. Patches of red and golden leaves were carried down the river.

A long time ago Robert's uncle, who had lived there beside the banks of the Clark Fork for many years, told him about the leaping trout. Robert wasn't sure if he believed him.

It was towards the end of summer, his uncle had said, around dusk. Just after dusk, rather. Or perhaps it was the very beginning of summer.

Does it matter? his uncle had asked, and Robert replied that it did not.

Anyway, his uncle said.

I was out fishing a half mile from the house. Suddenly a horde of leaping trout were flying by me, *against* the current, heading away from Missoula. *Against* the current, he'd emphasized. Have you heard of anything like that?

No one had ever seen leaping fish of any kind in the Clark Fork. The closest body of water where you'd spot leaping trout was the Missouri. Not around here, though, his uncle said.

I did not know what to think. There were hundreds of them, jumping so close I could feel the spray on my face. At first I was so shocked I began trudging farther into the river towards them, holding out my pole. I don't know why, but I was afraid.

His uncle chuckled an almost moaning chuckle and said, What kind

of person is afraid of fish?

And like that, as he approached them with his fishing pole, the leaping trout had bypassed him. He watched them for a few more seconds as they cut east through the air and water.

I stared for a while after them, and by then the moon was out and the surface of the river was calmer than it had ever been. Did I see those fish? he asked Robert in a serious tone. Was it possible that I did see them? Or was it a trick of the land? The way the water is always trying to trick you.

Then he had retraced his line and saw that he had snagged one.

It was not like a typical trout, he said.

What was the difference? Robert had asked.

I don't know now. There were a few differences.

He phoned a few of his friends in neighboring towns who had been fishing that day. No one had seen the leaping trout. They'd laughed at his story.

What do you suppose? Robert said.

What can I suppose, Robert? Leaping trout have never been spotted in this river, or in any of the outlets around here. But they were right here, and then they were not. That scene still haunts me.

Earlier Robert had used scissors on the pictures in his shoebox and cut out the faces of the people grinning into the camera, and slipped them all into the wallet with that of the red-haired boy's.



He tossed the wallet off the bridge.

Where is anybody? he said.

Back when his uncle told him about the leaping trout, Robert had asked,

But what about the one you caught?

His uncle frowned and smiled and then frowned again.

I cooked him and ate him when I got back, he said. I was hungry.

Now the wallet lodged behind the same rock as before, the place where Robert and the red-haired boy had uncovered it. Then the water brushed it casually free and it meandered downstream.

Robert walked the tracks back to the main road. Over the mountains the sun was blushing the sky a soft pink. On the road a flash of green as the Park Service pickup sped by.

From somewhere in the distance the rumble of a train was getting terribly loud.