

## *Muck*

She had taken to driving at night. Her old Pontiac curved down those long dark farm roads. The only one left who still searched for her sister amongst those spindly pines. Her headlights always caught the shiny tin of the water tower once she crested the last hill back to town. It was almost like she awoke every time then, jerked the wheel slightly. She never saw what she hoped for; her sister in her silvery-green prom dress, thumb held out at the road's edge.

She pulled off each night at the edge of the lake that surrounded town.

Even in dark, heat made the lake shimmer. Sheila had called it 'the muck' for as long as she remembered. Her childhood was thus; feet being pulled out of the muddy water with a squelch, long humid days as she and Barb searched for crawdads. It was never enough to fill a pot. Her daddy would make her carry all the still wriggling crawdads back to muck and toss them in. "A half empty pot fills no bellies," he would say and pack a snort up his nose.

He was always proud when Barb sucked the heads.

She walked out of her last job three weeks past. Cleaning rooms at the 'Thatch House'. A dump off the interstate painted to look like a Victorian cottage. 'A little slice of fancy in the Piney Woods' written in gilded marquee on the weathered billboard. Inside, there was the disappointment of whining air conditioners and plastic covered recliners. Beds that vibrated if you had exact change.

Ten years on the job and she finally just got sick of out of towners stuffed into Capri pants asking her if she could break a dollar.

A job notice was tacked to a creosote telephone pole downtown. "Creosote never rots," her father always said. He worked as a creosote sprayer until it killed him. They use machines now.

The flyer was in a spiderly hand. A map of faint dirt roads leading to the island of

Little Goat. Further out on the lake. Almost visible through a mosquito-tinged haze.

At nights when Sheila stood at the edge of the muck, she watched lights come on and off at Miss Lourie's house on Little Goat. No one had seen her in years. Her father had told her that she had drowned.

"Person spends too much time by themselves, that lake looks mighty inviting."

Her father's blue eyes never closed now. His irises had gone milky white, striated with pink veins. At the nursing home in Trinity, they told her his eyes had gone. She tried to imagine her old man grasping blindly, running through stony passageways of his mind. Hands like claws as he tried to scrap a way out.

He hadn't spoken to her in years. He didn't play the bingo, avoided the day room, barely sipped at the coffee that was always available.

Behind the island of Little Goat, about 2 miles away, Big Goat loomed out of the water.

A real island. Not some small clump of dirt and rock that someone built a house on.

Full of trees, weeds, bugs and who knows what else. Her father had taken Sheila and Barb there once. They spent more time playing with the night crawlers in the bait buckets. Until at last, their father made them look.

A beach full of mud. Tree branches hanging over water. Sheila remembered a catfish surfacing, casting its flat eyes at them and sinking back down. Their boat trolled around the island. There wasn't a path in. Their father hunched in the back of the boat. Sheila and Barb trolled their hands through the water. It was cold in the dead of summer.

Miss Lourie was the only person living out there now. And she needed a house keeper. "Young, fast and efficient," the ad read.

Sheila stood in front of the window AC until sweat under her armpits and breasts dried. The bedsheets were tangled and damp. The once white-400 thread count Indian cotton

now had a faint brown tinge. Ray Don refused to shower when he came in from the woods. He snored and would stay in bed until three and then scramble to make it to the lumber mill on time. She loved how he smelled like pine sap. Flakes of sawdust were always in his hair.

The snoring made the trailer faintly rattle.

His truck was still up on blocks. "Blown transmission, all I need to do is run down to the salvage yard and pick up another one," was Ray Don's diagnosis. Her Pontiac Sunbird was the only thing that worked like it should.

Ray Don and her were coming back from a long night of drinking. They closed Starvin' Marvin's down. Big Al locked the door after them. They collapsed laughing onto a picnic table in front of the bar. They watched Big Al empty ashtrays from inside, watched him sweep sawdust out the bar into the parking lot. Bruised rays of sunlight crested the lake.

"Places look depressing with nobody in them," Sheila said.

"They sure do, honey," Ray Don said. "Let's git."

Ray Don passed out soon after. Drool spilled from his lips and he sputtered in his sleep. Sheila drove his truck home, weaving through empty streets. On Sundays, no one was up before church.

A loud rattle came from the engine. She lost the throttle and the truck coasted down the main drag of town. They came to a stop with a soft thud against a curb. She wanted to scream but knew it would wake Ray Don.

He slept through it all. She left him in the truck and walked. Every other business was an abandoned storefront with reaching vacant windows. Whitewash from 'going out of business' sales had long since faded on most of them. She saw exposed wires dangling like vines from ceilings, saw papers scattered and let fall where they may, saw what looked like a mattress and pillow in one. Their trailer park at the top of the last hill in town was covered in dark shadows from the tall pines that loomed above. The sun still hadn't come up.

Miss Lourie's house wasn't far. She left her car in a dirt parking lot next to a Dollar-Sav. It was waiting for the ferry to get out to Little Goat that bothered Sheila. She had already smoked two of her three cigarettes for today.

Through spindly pine trees on Little Goat, Sheila saw the white eaves of Miss Lourie's house. All that cedar had been hauled over from Louisiana. Wood like that wouldn't grow in the bitter soil around here. When it rained the house nearly flooded.

"That house has a basement that bores deep into the belly of the earth," Her father whispered to her and Barb over a dim campfire, his voice dusky with whiskey. Rain came later that night and woke them up. Except for Barb. Who was out tending the frail fire as it came down. Neither of them knew what to do except watch the girl try to keep the blaze alight. "She knows it's useless," her father said to her.

She pulled the rope that rang a bell out on the island. The ferry, a john boat, crept over.

The lake hadn't always been there. The day clouded over as she waited for the ferry. The air had gotten heavy, and smelled like fresh grass. A wind came off the water that created meek whitecaps. It stirred loamy soil at the lake bottom and created a long swath that undulated under the water.

A john boat stopped at the beach and an old white hand, wrinkled with too much time spent in water, reached out for her. The man had jowls like a hound and hair tinted yellow. Sheila grabbed his hand and pulled herself into the boat. She perched in the bow, looking down into green murky water.

It didn't get deep until the boat pulled on the other side of Little Goat. It slowed as it crested the muddy shore. Sheila clutched at the side as she set her feet down on the wooden planks that served as a walk way. A path hadn't seen a gardener's clippers in quite a while. Knee high grass made Sheila's legs itch and she scratched without looking, her eyes on the

high cupolas of the house at the end of the path.

A cast iron gate hung barely open, tangled with green ivy that crawled over it. Sheila pulled on the gate and the metal keened. Small flakes of rust twisted in wind. Ivy pulled away. A face for a moment in the window at the top of the house.

The yard was filled with masonry that peeked out of weeds. Cracked crosses and frolicking children. Dismembered statues toppled in shadows of willow trees.

When she knocked on the door, sparrows flew from the rafters. Footfalls thudded down stairs from beyond a black walnut door. Wood that wasn't even local to this state.

Sheila noticed eyes first. Cracked by crow's lines, heavy with deep mascara that made the folds of skin seem endless. The eyes were muddy brown, flaked with small flakes of green.

"God's touch", her mother would have said. "A little sparkle of something wonderful in something so plain." A fragile, thin, wisp of a woman. She said the same about Barb's eyes.

Sheila's hand hung in mid-knock and for a moment she fought an urge to reach out and touch that old and tired face. To rub her thumbs in those deep crevices around the eyes and smudge that make up.

"You're the help," the woman said, her mouth opening enough to see brown teeth.

"What do you want to know?"

Miss Lourie let the door hang open. Weak light sprawled into the house. Dust hung thick in the air and Miss Lourie waved her hands through it.

Miss Lourie let the piece of paper with Sheila's references and half-made up previous employments slowly waft out of her thin-skinned hands. Through liver spots, Sheila thought she could see veins. And a slow pulse of blood through them.

The walls of the house were covered with in red damask wall paper. It had long ago

started to peel. It waved slightly from a breeze coming from open windows. Sheila saw faint outlines of paintings.

"These have not been cleaned in years," Miss Lourie said.

Miss Lourie eased herself into a tattered plush chair. Her hand made that slow and languorous movement to her mouth over and over as she smoked a cigarette perched in a brass holder. Sheila cleaned like she had cleaned so many times before.

This was no different than endless hotel rooms. She could not remember until later that night, sitting on a lawn chair in front of her trailer, what the paintings looked like. A blur of noses and sideburns. A shadow of a face, and a bulge of a grotesque nose

When she finished, Miss Lourie slept. Her mouth sprawled open, silver in her teeth glinting in sunlight that pierced the dark room. Sheila draped a blanket over her and let the rags she had been cleaning with fall to the floor.

Snores echoed out into the lake and kept time with the push of the waves onto Little Goat. It would only take one helluva of a storm to wash this island and the house on it to the bottom of the lake. A single light bobbed up and down further out. An empty pier on Big Goat.

There wasn't much else to do in this old and dusty place. Sheila thought about tearing the red damask that hung on the walls in pieces and using it to dust the rest of the house. She thought about opening all the windows of the house and letting the storm blow through. Already she could hear the rattle of the windows as the wind came hard.

She opened doors and peered into dark rooms. Spider webs in high corners, bird's nests tucked among furniture. Everything old and made of oak. She heard animals scurry and thought about snakes lurching out to bite her ankles. She could fall poisoned in this place and no one would ever know.

Grease congealed in a giant skillet in the kitchen. A layer of brown scum wound its

way around a toilet in the bathroom. Nothing looked new and nothing looked like it had been used in years. She saw raw potatoes littered around the house, small bite-marks having taken chunks out of each. She could come back tomorrow and for days and years after and she would keep discovering the things Miss Lourie had forgotten.

Sheila wondered about the darkness under the house when she tried the basement door. Locked. And no give when she pressed her shoulder against it.

Rain made a pitter-patter as it fell against leaves. Sheila closed all the windows except the one in the main room. Rain dotted Miss Lourie's face and her mouth gaped open.

"Hey," she said as she woke, her hand reached out and grabbed Sheila's wrist. "You'll do."

Miss Lourie stood at the front door, flopping her pale hand back and forth in a wave. Sheila trudged down a path back to the ferry. A piece of the red damask felt hot in her pocket.

As she looked out at the shallow lake, rain splashing her face, Sheila thought about the basement door and what lay beyond it. A deep dark hole that reached down under the lake. Dirt floors surrounded by cool stone.

The ferry waited for her the next morning. The ferryman held out a lighter with a shaky hand. She touched his skin to steady it. It felt cold. He smelled like dried mud.

It was the kitchen today. The note from Miss Lourie scrawled in lipstick on a piece of crumbling paper. Torn out of a Bible. 'Spick and span,' it said. She scrubbed bacon grease out of cast iron skillets. She threw out the back door the leavings of rabbits and rats. The sink was clogged and Sheila dug her callused fingers deep into a grimy mass. A glug-glug and it drained. The icebox was swampy and smelled of spoiled fish. It took both of her hands to grab a moldy turkey and heave it outside. Mustard was the only thing she left. Buzzards began to circle.

Only one of three burners worked. She used to heat up a rusted can of tomato soup.

The woman needed feeding before she left. As the soup bubbled, Sheila went to the basement door, pressing her weight against it again.

It gave slightly. There was a sound of nails scraping in wood, a rasp over and over deep in the basement as Sheila pressed her ear to the door.

Barb's nails were always bright green. No one knew where she got that color of polish from. Sheila looked in every store around town and couldn't find that color.

Miss Lourie's family paid for a funeral all those years ago. Old man Lourie resting his hand on his gut as they buried a child's coffin. Filled with Barb's things. Her yearbook, pages dog-eared. A toothless mangy stuffed bear that she slept with. A locked notebook that they never found the key for.

She came out of it with a yelp. Miss Lourie's grip clenched a nerve at her shoulder and she almost collapsed. Miss Lourie stared at her with brown green eyes. Flecks ever so bright. The old woman smiled. Her teeth white and unblemished. Almost like porcelain. Never needed brushing. Teeth like that last forever. Long into the grave.

"I heard something," Sheila said.

"You heard nothing."

"A scratching."

"All in your head. All in your head like my long dead father said." And with that, Miss Lourie walked her to the front door.

The door to the house wafted shut behind her. A faint poof of dust rising. For a moment, Sheila wanted to get a running start and take a leap and swim to the bottom of Lake Nancy. To close her eyes and just float in quiet darkness.

She waited for the boat and smoked her last cigarette for today. The ferry trolled up to the silty beach. Rufus gave a wave. White bass flopped in the bottom of the boat. Just caught, their mouths gaping open, sucking dead air.



Ray Don didn't come home that night. Instead of settling in for a dinner of reheated mash potatoes and too-stringy venison that had been sitting in the freezer for two years, she put on her heels. Her toes instantly hurt. She had gotten fatter. Blue veins bulged at the back of her calves.

She went to Starvin' Marvin's because the music was loud. She couldn't hear herself think, much less what the farm hand next to her was whispering in her ear. A nod every minute or so and she was fine. Beer was never cold and saw dust on the floor always an inch thick. A juke played from a back corner and a solitary couple swayed on the floor. Her kind of night.

Her father pulled her sister out of this place just once. Sheila was told to wait in the car. The neon lights blinked green blue out onto the highway as they pulled in. Her father's hands gripped the wheel knuckle white. His forearm was laced with a long curving scar from where a winch. Cut almost down to the bone. He was laid up for a month.

The scar glowed shiny white in the darkness. When he got angry, Sheila thought the scar would pop open and everything inside her father would burst out. He dragged Barb out by her long hair, tossing her in the truck bed.

He pulled strands of her hair from between his fingers as he drove them home. Barb stood up in the truck bed and Sheila thought she would leap. Her green dress flapped in the wind and she pulled the rest of the pins out of her hair. She screamed the whole way home.

Big Al nodded hello and slid a cold beer down the bar. The four beers deep cowboys who wandered out of the gas fields deep in the woods would fuck anything. The winter-green smell of Skoal never got old as the cowboys breathed it on her. She nodded and murmured. They would pile out of a truck 6 at a time. Already hooting to the moon.

She knew her sister was sneaking out. Barb slinking her way into a small green dress, applying makeup in moonlight. It was either off to Starvin' Marvin's or to where-ever boys

took her on the dark county roads. She heard whispers about it the next day at school.

Her sister was the only one who ever vanished.

Sheila had started to doze off before she felt a damp hand on her shoulder. Al kept his hair byrlcreemed still. From the shiny surface of the bar, she could see the underside of his chin.

“What’s with your beard?” she asked.

“Burns,” he said. His fingers touched the shiny patches where no hair grew. “From my drinking days. Fryer oil.”

“Still hurt?”

“Don’t even feel it anymore. Dead skin, I guess,” he paused to wipe out a dirty beer glass. “You want me to call someone?”

She shook her head and rubbed her fingers in her eyes.

“Days seem to be getting longer and longer.”

Outside in the parking lot, she sat in her car and let A/C blast her in the face. The radio played the lull of a country tune. Drunks stumbled out of Starvin’ Marvin’s as the neon lights flicked off. They piled in pickups and vanished back into the piney woods with a blast of diesel.

She cranked the Pontiac started and flashed her brights at the crowd.

She had the dream again that night. Her sister with green fingernails. She scratched at the lake surface like a thick pane of glass. She pounded so hard you could see it bulge. She screamed so hard you could see the delicate veins in her face.

The muck was dredged seven times. No body. Sheila lay awake nights picturing it floating out some secret sluice gate, down the mighty Trinity River, way out to sea to be devoured by some giant ocean beast. Fragments of her body floating ashore years later entangled in kelp.

She woke sweating again. Still no Ray Don. She threw on a shapeless brown dress. She hadn't seen Ray Don in two days. Her trailer had lost the taint of pinesap. She had quit cleaning up the sawdust that he brought home every day.

The ferryman offered a pinch of snuff. Sheila lit a cigarette, one of three for the day. Tall, spindly pines clouded the horizon. The undergrowth was sparse shrubs, bare sticks mostly. Trailers dotted the woods, garish white boxes with outcrops of trash. Catfish heads on fences, burn piles still smoking.

"Expecting rain soon. This month or next." He gave a salute and turned the boat around. Sheila's feet sank in rich mud at the edge of the muck.

She left muddy footprints on the front porch. Miss Lourie sucked her teeth and spit. Her rocker creaked as she slowly waved the fan over herself.

"Time was I could have someone sit here and wave this fan," She said. "And they would have no complaints at all."

She hitched her skirt around her thighs. Long sweaty veins laced up each hairless leg.

"I could use some tea if you're of a mind." Sheila went into the kitchen and pulled the jug of sun tea off the sill. Due to the hanging willows that surrounded the house, nary a shaft of light got in. The tea was a pale brown. Weak. She strained the bags with her hands, feeling grit between her palms. An ice machine that hadn't worked in years. She opened the fridge and grabbed leftover venison. Sheila cut away the fat and put a skillet on the stove.

Gas flared up. Sheila pulled her hair back and lit her cigarette with a flame. The meat was done, but she let it char, let the smoke fill up the house and cover all the smells of mold, of decaying grease, of all the times Miss Lourie slept with her mouth open and let her hot, stale old breath hover in these empty rooms.

The meat burned so long that you couldn't tell she had been smoking. She ground out ash in burnt venison and flipped her butt in the sink. Sheila doused it in ketchup and dumped

sugar in the tea. Miss Lourie smacked her gums as she ate, her tongue flapping around her mouth like a wild animal trying to escape her face. She gulped at the tea.

Sheila thought about taking her penknife and cutting off the tongue. She'd fling it out into the muck. Watch a giant cat swallow it up, digest it for days.

There were better things to do. She dabbed her napkin against Miss Lourie's thin, sagging lips. How easy it would be to pinch the nose closed and place a hand over her mouth.

She flung what was left of the meat into the yard. The plate was caked in grease. Lukewarm water barely made a dent in it.

Her back gave a twinge as she thrust herself against the basement door. Once, twice, three times and it gave. A light switch had no effect. Pitch black darkness. She didn't know how long she would have this job.

The windows and front door. That was it. Let all the light in. Sheila pulled open all the shades and propped black walnut door open with an ash tray. The muck was calm still, almost expectant in its quiet. Somewhere out there her sister lay buried deep. Her father still raged in his nursing home.

The house took a deep breath as it expelled years. Dust rose with gusts of wind. A storm was coming.

Light from outside barely made it into the basement. Enough for her to see that it was a root cellar. She hefted a jar and swirled it. Whatever was inside had long since dissolved into mush. Miss Lourie snored and stopped, snorted and stopped and went quiet. Rain came first in sprinkles. Hot rain, the type that would stir up parched ground.

Her sister's asthma was always frightening after a rain. Deep, retching gasps so much like Miss Lourie's rattling snores. A last memory of Sheila's mother was watching her place painted red lips over Barb's mouth and force vodka tinged air into her lungs. Her dress rising, flowers on her panties. Lilacs. The woman loved purple

Sheila let the jar drop and it slowly rolled deeper into the root cellar. She felt her way along the walls. Packed dirt gradually became gnarled with tree roots intermingled with clammy stone. No light here at all. Miss Lourie still slept on the front porch, her mouth wide open, catching all the rain that fell. Sucking it down her stinking gullet. Rivers and lakes would flow out of her when she died.

Thunder rumbled and Sheila could feel the walls tremble. She blinked and blinked in the darkness and nothing came. Nothing at all. Sheila called Barb's name as she walked deeper down. She was under the muck now, comforted by the weight of all that water pressing down on her.