

Last Cast at Indian Falls

A Short Story

The dream is always the same. The Perfume River, South Vietnam. 1968.

Ray is waist deep pushing against the current. He pulls leeches off his painted face and struggles for traction. Each breath of the seared flesh air makes him gag. The river glows with red-hot lava and silver streaks of mercury float on the surface like vinegar on oil. Vinnie and Doug are in a camouflaged raft caught in a violent eddy. They're naked and bloodless pale as dead men should be. Sunlight rays through the bullet holes punched from their bodies and they laugh like drunks stumbling down an alley. Vinnie plays the M16 air guitar and Doug clog dances chanting 'Hail Jesus, You're my King.'

Ray claws through the burning liquid trying to intercept the raft. His sleeves are on fire and his tattoos melt. He's inches from the raft. A blinding white light tears his vision. Incoming mortar rounds blast deep holes along the riverbank and walk toward him one by one, shattering everything in the way. A round hits the raft and Vinnie and Doug vanish, detonated into transparent confetti. Debris is suspended in the blackness and glows like fireflies at midnight.

Ray can hear the echo of Doug's final scream through the whistle of incoming. "Where were you, Motherfucker? Where were you?"

“Ray! Ray! Wake up,” Roxanne says pushing his shoulder. “Wake up. Shane’s here. Time to go.”

Ray sits up in a startle and breathless. His face is wet and he can taste the salt of fear. He’s sweated his t-shirt. The burn scars on his forearms shine like molded plastic. His hands shake. “Goddamnit.”

“Ray. Calm down. It’s the dream again,” Roxanne says as she rolls over to face him on the bed. She reaches out and puts her right hand over his heart. “Calm down.”

Ray takes a deep breath and counts as he exhales to gain control like they teach you. Visualize calm they say. He looks into Roxanne’s chocolate eyes; tangled waves of silver black hair roll across her shoulders. He can feel the strength and heat of her hand on his chest. It’s her way of taming the beast after living with his demons for so long.

“You okay? Shane’s out front. It’s time to go.” Outside, the rumble of Shane’s revved up dual exhaust rattles the windows. It’s louder than a 747 at take-off.

“Yeah, Rox. I’m fine.”

Moments later Ray is out the front door with his gear-bag, the new Spey rod Roxanne gave him for Christmas and a cooler loaded with sandwiches and beer she’d packed the night before. He tosses the load into the back of Shane’s Dodge pickup truck and climbs into the cab.

Shane chuckles as Ray fumbles with the seatbelt. “Dreams again, huh?”

“Yeah. Same one. Same shit, different night. Started up again a couple months ago.”

“Great. Means I get forty-five more years on top of what I already got, huh?” Shane says tapping his left leg with his aluminum coffee cup. It rings metal on metal. “Dreams are a bitch. Like they’re real, but I always got both legs. Guess that ain’t that bad. Just a closet full of left shoes, huh?”

Ray looks over at Shane and nods. They’re years and worlds apart. Afghanistan and Vietnam. Ray an old white haired warrior from the Age of Aquarius and Shane, the model of the modern day American “twentysomething” soldier. Part hip-hop; part dragon slayer. Bonded together on the VA med line by experience and blood loss. Grasping at an uncertain sanity only those without can see.

“Fuck it,” Ray says. “Let’s go fish. Di di mao.”

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Two hours later as the sun zeroes at eye level and the road looks like a stainless steel ribbon, Shane ditches the freeway at Exit 88. Turning south, they motor through the hills where spring is painted in white cherry blossoms and green swaths of winter wheat. Ray dozes until Shane crosses an iron cattle guard at the start of a gravel access road to the river.

“Let’s check out the falls turnout first,” Ray says, assuming his usual command attitude.

“Roger that, LT.” Shane stomps on the accelerator and fishtails across the gravel. Both men laugh.

Halfway to the takeout where the road hugs the river, Shane growls like a crazed pit bull as they rumble past the BLM boat ramp and parking lot.

Three medium sized school buses are parked down the hill from the road. At water's edge, over 30 life-jacketed youngsters cluster around several eight-man rafts lined up like a NASCAR pit stop. They wave at Ray and Shane.

They're the first group of rafters this year, but not the last. In the weeks to come thousands will descend to clog the river in every kind of floatation device known to man from the main reservoir to the final BLM take out, a mile above the falls.

"Looks like the Christian school booby hatch is on the water," Shane says, flipping the youngsters the bird.

Ray chuckles.

"Those little snots are a real pain in the ass," Shane says. When it comes to rafters, Shane has the patience of a cobra and strikes without warning. As far as he's concerned, rafts have no business on "his" steelhead stream. "Maybe Indian Falls will eat those kids."

"Yeah, that'd screw the fishing good," Ray laughs, egging Shane on as he pulls over and stops at the turnout near the trail down to the waterfall.

Called "Indian Falls" by fishermen because of the Tribal dip net scaffolds on one side and a fish ladder on the other, the falls is a mass of violent white water exploding at the bottom of a 30-foot drop into the last major obstacle migrating steelhead and salmon have to navigate on their way up river to spawn.

It's also a killer. In the old days crazy daredevils and beer-fueled idiots ran the falls in everything from twelve man rafts to plywood-topped inner tubes. When the body count became too much of a P.R. problem for the BLM and the

Tribe, everything from rafts, tubes, canoes, drift boats and such were prohibited. Now it's the DMZ for recreational watercraft.

“Chill. We won't even see 'em.”

Ray and Shane string their rods and pull on waders and wading boots. The daytime temperatures will reach 80 degrees, but the water still has the bite of snow melt run-off.

They hike down to the river through a crease in the canyon crowded with fir, pine and alder. Shane leads with a skip and swing leg motion to compensate for his artificial limb. The sound of the falls breaking over the edge vibrates in the trees. As they emerge from the thick forest pocket, the roar of tumbling water becomes a visceral tremor adding a frightening power to the river only sound can deliver. When they reach the path along the bank, Ray flips a quarter. Shane calls tails and wins.

“Pin 'em, dude,” he says turning downstream to hike several hundred yards past the first set of rapids after Indian Falls tails out. At some point he'll turn and fish back upstream. He'll meet Ray later.

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Ray hikes up river along the edge of the tight basalt cliffs that pinch the water before it breaks out over the falls. Like Shane, he'll walk up several hundred yards picking his spots, and then fish back downstream.

He passes the first set of rapids and around another set boiling in a tight curve. It's a Class 5 run of angry waves, two steep drops and river sharpened boulders known for killing a few kayakers and rafters dumb enough to take it on,

legal or not. He traverses the canyon wall following a worn fisherman's trail above the river until he spots the first place he intends to fish.

Dropping down to the bank, Ray steps into the water. He eyes an unusual run on the far side cutting out from the main fast water and slowing near the rocky edge.

"There's gotta be fish in that slot," he says to himself as he pulls the thick yellow line from the reel and plays it out with his two-handed Spey.

Wading in the current to mid-thigh, Ray strips several feet of line off the reel to anchor it, then lifts the line up to begin the cast. He's a rookie with the rod and his casting technique shows his inexperience. It takes several attempts to find the rhythm he needs to produce the fluid motion to shoot the florescent line out far enough and drop the fly into the spot he wants. Finding the right tempo to cast, Ray steps further into the stream above his target.

After swinging the fly through the seam several times, Ray moves to shore and walks down river. He studies the water, looking for particular stretches he thinks hold fish. Seams of flat water adjacent to faster flows, pools in the cusp of tail-out riffles and shaded runs where the water swirls over hidden obstacles are perfect hideouts for weary steelhead fighting the heavy strength of the river as they swim upstream.

Ray repeats the process, moving to the bank, hiking over boulders, shuffling along the shore with a keen eye on the water. He sees a section to fish and wades in, knees bent to brace against the current. He shoves his way across the flow to a point where he gains his balance and casts to the slice of water he's sighted.

Not staying too long in any one section, rounding the first bend, then the next, wading in and wading out, Ray passes on fast runs and fishes the soft water. When he reaches the Class 5 chute, he climbs up the facing wall to the trail and makes his way around back down to the bank. A large eddy formed several yards from the tail-out wraps back into the flow with a smooth seam that looks promising.

Ray wades in. The surface appears easy, but the charging undertow shoves him deeper than he wants to be. Its power skids him along the gravel bottom. He fights for stability but is pushed to waist deep water. The flow takes him further out.

Water slaps his face and fills his nose. He coughs up the taste of melted snow and spits it back. Another step and water spills over the top of his waders, sending icy streams down his chest and back. A hard smack knocks his hat off. It's caught in the current upside down and is gone. Fighting against the flow, Ray tiptoes along like a prima ballerina touching the bottom, bouncing up and thrusting at a slight angle toward the quiet, shallow waters closer to the bank.

When he reaches shore, he sits on a deadfall alder and bends over with his elbows on his knees, drawing deep breaths, and looks down at his feet.

Around him, the forest snaps with bees and beetles keeping time with songbirds flying sorties back and forth across the river. The sun begins to warm the crisp air crowded around the shade alders.

Woodpeckers pound the bark for beetles. Black squirrels argue with the jays over campsite treats. Overhead, an osprey dances across a razor-sharp blue sky, screaming a hollow monologue. The wind ricochets off the tips of trees and

sweeps through the canyon, shuffling the bushes to rattle out a low, trembling hum in harmony with the purr of the river cutting through the canyon.

On the opposite bank, a morning hatch of tiny midges swarms and bounces in the thin breath of wind over a small eddy punched out of a basalt cliff. Looking down past his boots to the mossy, tufted ground cover, Ray can almost hear the bickering of ants as they trudge back and forth lugging huge chunks of whatever to wherever they're going.

Like a room full of babies, everything is crying for attention and breakfast.

On the tip of the wind, a slight echo catches his attention. It's a shrill hint of terror.

Up river, in the massive white water run he'd passed, an orange blur of a raft stands on end, frozen in air. Locked in a violent shimmy, it flips backwards and recoils off the canyon wall, disappearing into a foaming wall of water. The raft shoots back to the surface. It's launched skyward looking like a Polaris missile blasting off a submarine. It cartwheels in the air and drops down into the folding torrent disintegrating as it slams against the rocks. The rapids swallow the shredded remains.

A faint panic scream carries in the breeze. Then another. At first it's a whisper. Ray squints through the bright sunlight and turns his ear toward the brutal roar, not sure what he's heard.

The shrieks become clear. Two heads attached to waving arms and orange floatation jackets bobble in the vicious foam racing towards him, screaming. Children.

Adrenalin replaces fatigue. Stumbling over rocks and deadfall branches, he runs to the cries as they push his way.

Ray drops his rod and starts to rip off his wading belt and vest.

“No way I can swim,” he says. “No way.”

The first kid is seconds away from sailing past him. The other disappears, but pops up to the surface in front of a huge boulder and is spit back into the rage. Both kids pick up speed.

“Hold on,” he yells, screeching his voice as if he could will the force of the river.

Ray’s options explode inside of him. What can I do? He flashes through his life. Laughter and giggles pierce echoes of horror. Children plead for mercy. The river howls a deadly howl. Doug screams. “Where were you?”

Ray chokes down panic. He grabs the Spey and strips line from the reel. It might be strong enough to hold a kid.

Ray anchors the line into the current. The river pulls the line tight and with both hands on the grip he hauls it back over his right shoulder and swings the line into a “D” loop, snapping his arms toward the target the instant he feels the line load. The force generated by the move sends it out into the center of the river, several feet ahead of the first screaming child.

“Goddamnit, missed,” Ray shouts. “Hold on. Hold on. I’ll get ya!”

Again, he hauls the line back up and swings the rod. He feels the line load and fires again. The thick yellow line streaks through the air and drops down over the screaming kid.

“Grab the line. Grab the goddamn line and pull.”

The youngster doesn't understand.

"Grab the line and pull."

The current controls the line. It curves out and begins to slip through the kid's hands as the rush of water drives it downstream.

"Grab the line."

As the line threads over the kid, the No. 6 Purple Marabou fly snags his life jacket. He grabs the line and is swept across the water like a cat's tail sweeps the ground right before it pounces. In seconds he's into shallow waters.

"Stand up and let go of the line," Ray orders. "Get out of the water."

The kid, maybe ten years old, struggles to stand and drops the line in the water. He trembles with cold and his eyes are on fire with fear.

Ray looks back into the boil of rapids searching for the other child. The young boy races past in the swift current and stares at Ray in hopelessness. "Is he too far?" Ray thinks as he runs down river after the now silent kid?

The first boy walks out of the water wailing an eerie-pitched moan as Ray sprints past. The kid is shivering blue inside his orange life jacket.

Leaping over broken logs and dodging larger rocks along the waters' edge, Ray narrows the gap between the floating child and himself. The river flow is at a bend and churns into a broad sweep to the right. Rocks, taller than men and wider than cars form a slight bump that sticks out into the river.

If he can push harder, he'll over take the boy and make it to the point where he'd have time for one last cast to save the child. If he doesn't, they'll add the kid's name to the body count at the bottom of Indian Falls.

Ray pumps his legs; his thighs burn against the confinement of the waders. Slipping over mossy rocks and stumbling through sand, he braces against falling by pushing off the ground with his free hand. He gasps for air. His lungs feel scraped raw. His heart beats a violent cadence.

He closes the distance and slides to a stop. Again he slaps the water with the rod, playing line out into the current. The boy floats into the beginning of the long sweep and Ray snaps the line and rolls it out a few feet ahead of the kid.

“Grab the line. Grab the fucking line and pull.”

The boy grabs the line with both hands.

“Got him. Ho, ho, I got him,” Ray rants in a wheeze.

Pulling hard on the rod, Ray swings the frightened boy through the current to the thin water on the edge. The kid tries to stand but falls backwards. Ray throws the rod down and runs to the boy, diving for his legs as the river seizes the kid’s body, snatching it back into its deadly vortex.

Ray hits the water hard, smashing his nose on a rock but manages to wrap his hands around the kid’s ankles. The current flips him over and water charges into his waders, filling his pant legs with deadly weight. Together, they’re thrown into deeper, faster water and slammed against a submerged boulder, then another and another. Ray holds the kid with one hand and claws at each rock they bounce off of, trying to find a grip.

Grabbing a clump of weeds growing out of a grass-covered rock, Ray pulls himself and the boy to a stop.

Inching himself to the backside of the rock, he feels the bottom under his feet. He flops the boy over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, and with both hands free, tugs along the rocks until he reaches the bank, collapsing in a heap.

Ray rolls to his hands and knees, fighting for breath. Blood runs steady from his nose and from an abrasion on his forehead. The kid lies in a fetal curl retching and moaning.

"Buddy? You okay?" Ray asks as he pulls the boy up to a sitting position. "Take a deep breath and let it out slow... Real slow."

The kid stares at Ray, wide eyed and bewildered. He tries taking deep gulps of air, but manages only to puke up water and cough.

Ray hears voices coming towards them. They're muted by the groaning of the river and hidden behind boulders and alder brush hugging the bank.

"Jason! Jason! Where are you?" It's a wild shriek of a mother, a frantic plea near hysteria. Ray steadies himself on a large rock and stands up. Searing pain runs up both legs and his knees buckle. Lurching against the stone for balance, Ray waves his arms at the approaching crowd and sits back down. The run and tumble through the rapids beat him bad. The closer the crowd gets, the louder they scream, the more the pain pushes him into a daze.

"He's over here. He's okay," Ray groans and vomits blood red river water as several adults and a few orange-vested youngsters scurry over the rocks to where he and the boy are huddled. Two adults grab Ray and help him to his feet. One woman kisses him full on the lips and smears her face with his blood. "I'm so happy you were here. You saved them both. Praise Jesus."

A half-hour later, after he's regained his composure, emptied the water from his waders and collected his gear, Ray slips away from the crying pack of grateful parents and rafters. He refuses to give them his name or much else, saying it was "no big deal."

By the time he reaches the truck, he's sweating. The deep cold from the river and the pain has been chased away by the hike up through the wooded ravine. His nose has quit bleeding and the scrape on his head is congealed. He changes into dry pants and a shirt, grabs a sandwich and a beer from the cooler and sits on a folding chair he'd left in the pickup bed.

One bite from the sandwich and a half a beer later, Ray is asleep, slumped in the chair with his chin on his chest.

"HooRah, LT!" Shane roars as he hoists a glistening 10-pound hatchery steelhead above his head. "Dude. Did I pin a big one, or what?"

The End