

The Mississippi Pulls You Under

It was May, and the humidity lay like a wet dog on a porch, panting over the Mississippi River. Memphis slept, and except in the late-night haunts of Beale Street and the brightly lit houses of the city's teenagers, a thick silence comforted the dreaming. Down on Democrat, near the airport, even the prostitutes at work in the Taco Bell parking lot had left with a customer or gone home. But a lone bicyclist made her frantic way in the general direction of the freeway, glancing behind her, red hair catching on the zipper of her jacket and in her teeth, bared in effort.

She caught a glimpse of the car behind her, as she turned onto Lamar, and she pushed her pedals harder. The wheels slipped as she lost her balance, and regained it; the car seemed to check as its headlights rested on her back, then it sped forward. She pulled into the grass by the shoulder, pushing ever harder through the mud from last week's rain, attempting to make her way across the field. Softly, she felt the ever-so-slight caress of a butterfly in her stomach, the car slammed into her back wheel and laid her out on the ground beyond. The car kept on, over her long red hair, back onto the street, and out into the freeway.

That's how I heard it – at least, the story I heard was a bit more of the bare-bones, if you know what I mean. But I have to imagine it, even in its darkest, weakest details, or it doesn't make any sense. A little like the frogs I dissected in high school – if I'd never caught those tiny live ones in my backyard in the darkest of Tennessee summers, and held their warm, pulsing bodies in my pee-stained hands, I'd never have believed that class science projects weren't just rubber. Oh, I let the baby frogs go, back in our backyard, and I want to let this memory go, but it won't jump out of my hands. So I remember it as I would like to remember it, clean it up and drop it down into a make-shift aquarium in an old jam jar. And I watch it, and draw it, each wart and wrinkle.

The day before she died, Dabney opened her eyes in her mother's home, cozied into a t-shirt and soffe shorts, buried beneath layers of sheets and blankets. Washing her face in the bathroom, she watched the flat straight edge of her thick red hair swing shut across her face, the last inch died black. She picked at the skin around her cuticles, pulling the irish pennets and biting her nails.

Dabney was a striking fair-skinned girl, her face all angles in the right places and soft in the cheeks. She had a hard look in her eyes when she looked at strangers, which category had come to include virtually everyone she'd grown up with. She counted a few girls among her close friends, girls who, like her, felt somewhat alien to the life their parents had paid for them to lead – and left out from the fruits that life had promised. She wouldn't say she'd been hurt, but she made a note of the many girls she'd known who like her, had left the old school in somewhat suspicious circumstances; left, or led a career distinguished by rumor and long talks in the principal's office.

It was a time in the girls' lives when the greatest embarrassment was to be forbidden to "walk", when the personal tragedies of death and dysfunction only surfaced for the blind babies of the class when they erupted in scandal and bad behavior. She had left the school a semester early – itself a thing talked about in some groups only in hushed tones, and with the fear tinged by ignorance of true despair.

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But she returned with friends, eating lunch in the senior den, aware of the eyes on her, the wondering, the questioning if maybe – shocker of all shocks – she might have grown up faster than the rest of them. But then, she knew, that anchor-word “drugs” would drag such nascent attempts at free thinking back to the depths of the unquestioning search for a good college.

That morning, Dabney walked downstairs to the kitchen, pouring herself a bowl of cereal, eaten dry. Crunching through each bite, she checked her assignments for class at the computer and noted the ease with which she would finish them.

“Oh are you still here, Dabney?” Her mother turned in to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Mrs. Jones had none of the pale mermaid beauty of her daughter. She was short, and she slept on wrinkled pillows that left marks on her cheeks hours after she woke up. Her hair *frixxed*. I don’t suppose she ever got along with the other moms, and her own room was a collection of paperbacks from the used book store – read in one sitting. She returned the ones she liked best, getting store credit and the hope that she might have brightened someone else’s day, no matter how long the book sat molding on the shelf. Her own shelves, therefore, were cluttered with the many unloved, unfinished, untouched.

She loved to count her pennies and nickels on the kitchen table until she could make stacks tall enough to fit in a coin tube. She would line up each open tube over the stack and carefully slide it over the coins, delighting in the slight corrections she made with her fingers when the tube struck on protruding edges. For the same feeling of satisfaction, she used to insist on playing Jenga with Dabney, long after Dabney had outgrown playing games with her mother.

“When are you headed out?” Mrs. Jones lowered her face into the back reaches of the fridge.

Dabney waited. After about five minutes of searching, Mrs. Jones pulled out a yogurt sitting in front and began peeling back the seal. She put her pinky in and tasted the yogurt, humming to herself as she shut the fridge door and left the kitchen,

Dabney’s shoulders loosened. She caught herself not breathing and cursed herself for the instinctual response. She was in college now, had a boyfriend, had a job, had left that life behind her – the lost life, the slow descent into obscurity and banality. She was found now, not by some kind of routine college experience, hanging upside down on dorm lounge couches, philosophizing with more erudition the more blood rushed to her head – that was someone else’s college, probably most of the girls at school, only just now putting up their acceptance and rejection letters on the walls of the senior den.

Now, let’s be fair, here. Let’s be truthful. We don’t want any run-around – let’s have the bad guys out at the beginning, where we can see them. Dabney had a boyfriend, but he was over 50 and spent most of his time in Orange Mound in some one or other’s apartment. Orange Mound isn’t as bad as the rap songs would have you believe, but it’s my personal opinion her boyfriend wasn’t there playing bridge with the grandmas. He was pale, too, but not like Dabney; he had a jaundiced under-layer that *Vogue* would try to say matched with some kind of color but really just matched with cocaine.

He often scratched himself – not like that, you perv – on his arms and legs, so much that you started to wonder if he scratched because he had scabs or if he had scabs because he scratched.

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Anyway, these scabs comforted Dabney slightly – they reminded her of lower school, when Hannah used to run behind the bushes at recess and make up stories about everyone else, Hannah with her legs covered in red welts.

And let's be completely honest, since we're already started down that track – Dabney had a job, but it wasn't babysitting. Dabney sold drugs and she was damn good at it, too. She filched a little and it was ok because she was pretty and sold more than the others.

“Consider it a bonus,” her contact told her.

Well, it's not like I can make any sense of this myself – I wasn't in the inner sanctum, as they say, and I usually felt the quick blackness of whiplash anytime someone mentioned something untoward going on by one of the girls in class. It's a goddamned miracle I even heard this much before excusing myself.

I know she did her homework that day, and that she left home without worrying to say goodbye. I know she got on her bike and rode out onto Walnut Grove, into traffic, up onto the sidewalk, back into the right lane. I know she turned onto Perkins, and Southern, and Central, until she rounded out to the University of Memphis. I know she went to class and sat there staring at the professor, trying to get a glimpse inside his mouth to see if that really was a tongue piercing glinting or only a prominent crown. I know she lathered up on sunscreen because she wasn't about to die of skin cancer, and that she got on her bike and continued down Southern until she reached Orange Mound. I know that she got off her bike in front of a house and called through a set of broken windows to her boyfriend. I know she planned on going home. I know she stood in the sunlight with sweat melting the sunscreen on her legs and her nose becoming a darker shade of pink.

She got a voicemail from her mother, and maybe she listened to it then.

“Hon, I didn't see you when you went out. Your daddy's coming home early so I'm ordering something in – pizza, Chinese, or you wanna pick up Neely's on the way home?”

I know Mrs. Jones, after leaving that message, turned over under the sheets and went back to sleep, snug in the knowledge that she had done something.

A skinny woman with braids and ashy skin came out of the house and stood on the porch, staring silently at Dabney in the street. Dabney took her in –the long nails and the low-slung shorts. The tank top pulled on hurriedly and not readjusted. The woman's blank face, without fear of judgment or even curiosity. The boyfriend came out, bent down to tie his shoelaces. Dabney looked at the woman again.

“You should rub some lotion on,” she said, and got on her bike again.

When we were in the first grade, we girls of the South, we would wear long gingham dresses and white Keds. Blonde hair, straight and fly-away, would lie sweetly down our backs. Burning in the sunshine. Frizzing in the rain. But Dabney wore green tie-dye t-shirts with words we couldn't quite sound out, and kelly green legging shorts and Reebok tennis shoes. Dabney peeled the skin from around her fingernails, but never bit it, an accomplishment whispered about in awed accents, never in front of teachers.

For Dabney could peel – so the legend went – a whole layer of skin completely off a single finger, without breaking it or stopping. Dabney was the human equivalent of a spiral-peeled apple.

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She was, in six year olds' eyes (even the six year old baby girls of Southern businessmen and stay-at-home belles), the ideal combination, both accomplished and disgusting. She was extraordinary in her grossness, powerful in her retention of all we had been required to relinquish. Well, not all of us – some of us remained bound in the dirt or hung out on branches – but we were gross in a boring way, we had never transcended into a higher register. Dabney now, she was both disgusting and uniquely so – also delightfully dismissive, even at six, of all her accomplishments. It was not Dabney, after all, who whispered about her achievements. To look down the long lunch table at that pale freckled face was to become convinced that she could never herself have revealed her heroism.

She also rarely came to class. Too sick, they said. Always blowing her nose. I have a distinct sense that we placed her in that no-man's category of the "germy" girls, those we used to forbid from touching doors. When told to line up, we would jostle to stand as far away from Dabney and germy Jenna, and throw distressed looks down the line if one of them was called on to hold the door for the rest. Who were these teachers, not to notice their snot, clinging to an upper lip or the edge of a ragged nail?

But Dabney, with her peeling skin, became quite popular on those few days she attended school. Her allergies lent her glamour, while others' dirt-eating made them an object of scorn. Later, Dabney would move from snot and skin to alcohol and drugs; one without the other was ordinary or pathetic. Both together were rebellious and powerful. Always, I looked on in wonder, fear, and a vague disbelief. How I envied the girl whose example made me boring, how I longed to skip school by sneezing or, in high school, to complain of headaches on Monday morning.

Dabney made her way down to the bluffs. She found an open spot of grass and concrete, behind the condemned children's hospital and the ornamental metal museum. She sunned. Late in the evening, she woke up with an itching nose and thought – that's going to burn tomorrow. That's going to peel. Somewhere – everywhere – cicadas.

I guess it's not enough to mention the condemned children's hospital – it's not something you just blow by. Have you ever seen a ghost? I swear to God I have, in the hall past my bedroom, upstairs, a Civil War soldier. He was dark haired and tan, and he was *not* my brother. I checked. Dabney didn't believe in ghosts, that Southern tradition, those ghosts we see in swamplands and Spanish moss and the abundance of oral history.

Swept away in the currents of the Mississippi that day were two children out for a swim, but Dabney didn't see them go under, and she didn't feel their souls pull at her heart, in weak attempts to grasp the spiritual ropes of those nearby. Her heart didn't turn in fear to thoughts of the condemned children's hospital, and she didn't pull her bike over its rusting fence. But then, she always defied expectations, that Dabney.

Riding down the empty hallways, Dabney braked to look into each room and sped past old gurneys still waiting by defunct elevators. She climbed to the top floors of the hospital and found a door off its hinges, leading to the roof. She looked out over the New Bridge to Arkansas, down the slopes of the brick towers ascending from either wing. Dabney leapt from rooftop – in her mind she leapt, and landed in the Mississippi and swam away, down to New Orleans, floating on her back. Up here, up here, up here.

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By the time she opened the front door and left the children's hospital, the brick exterior had blended into the darkness. Her phone rang.

The boyfriend was 55 years old, and I found this out so much later. He didn't call himself her boyfriend, not on the news, not in the bleak alleys of Orange Mound. He didn't tell the police. But they knew and he knew, and Dabney knew once, but does not know anything now. There's a moment when disgust turns from titillation to pity, and that is, I think, when we grow up.

Dabney was heavier than your mind would picture her – she carried the weight of alcohol and junk food as youth can – it filled her without distorting the freshness of her skin or the angles of her face. She used and got arrested and was told privately, in the principal's office, that it would be better if she chose not to return for her final semester of her final year. The school gave her the boot, and the principal hugged her goodbye. She accepted the hug, even melted into it, and left. In her pocket, was a new phone, and on her phone was a message, listened to twelve times already, from a man who called himself a descendent of Memphis royalty. Winchester or Overton or Whitten or something – it doesn't matter. He carried on, he owned the bond building, he'd help her out, he had connections. The boyfriend materialized.

She applied to colleges in town and the boyfriend called her every day. He picked her up from class and took her to a distribution point where he talked over the finer points of her Aristotle readings and counted cash. He let her have some of the product as commission, he dropped her off at class the next morning. He told her he loved her, he told her if she left, he'd find her.

Dabney answered her phone. I reconstruct the next few hours as haze and deliberate fog because I'd rather not know that she returned to his house in Orange Mound and stayed for several hours. Whether she gave herself to him willingly or not, it is still painful to see her there – either a participant or a victim. Is she both? Is she neither? She is, she was. She will be.

But she left. She rode her bike out at two a.m., and she felt the buzzing of her phone. Behind her, a car hummed awake, and she turned down an alley. Out and down, down, out, over, through. Every which way. He followed, slowly; she biked. She sped, she turned. And then she was out onto the shoulder, across a field. And his lights caught on the shine of her zipper, the floating red of her hair. He checked, as if to be sure; he sped. He went out on the shoulder, down into the field, he went down, out, over, and through. He sped away.