

Steve Oberlechner

Morning Freeze on Brown's Run

Thin ground fog shrouds the north branch of Brown's Run as I follow my father upstream along his trap line. It is December. Dawn. Sixteen years old and home from school on winter break, I try to keep pace with his practiced stride, to stay dry and upright as the rubber soles of my Lacrosse waders slide on the slick, submerged rocks, sink into soft clay. When my father points a gloved finger left or right at the creek banks, I squint to locate the spread, circular jaws and the pans of his traps waiting at the bases of muskrat slides, at the mouths of holes he chopped into the bank and baited while I sat in the classroom on a morning weeks prior. I try to stay focused as he rebaits his sets, lifts trapped and drowned muskrats, the occasional mink, from the murky water, but my mind drifts to the Fall Formal dance, the rare thrill of a body pressed close to mine in the darkened gymnasium as I sway to the slow ones by Eric Clapton and Elton John until I notice my father has stopped five paces ahead, his right arm raised, the fingers of his shoulder-length gauntlet balled into a fist.

I have seen this gesture in war movies, the silent urgency of soldiers walking point when a threat is detected. He wants me to freeze, but I risk slinking the last steps forward against the current to where he stands, fist still raised at his right. I look over his shoulder upstream through the mist rising like steam over a cauldron, through the bare branches and brambles that press in on each side of the creek and see nothing. Then, I hear it: the shrill and broken voices of children like chirps of distant birdsong over the roil of water, the soft wind and the rattle of branches.

I turn to the left bank, where the woods slope some sixty feet upward to Sunshine Hollow Road and a small, white house perched beside it. I had a better view of the house in passing it hundreds of times on the drive to my grandmother's house in Messmore, had seen three boys, none older than eight, at play on the front porch, had waved to their mother, middle-aged, brunette, as she unloaded bagged groceries from a raised hatchback parked roadside, had read the name painted in white letters against their black mailbox as I passed: the Hutsons. The boys often stopped playing to gawk as I drove by, but the mother ignored my passing on the quiet stretch of road, never smiled or lifted an arm in cordial, country greeting. Now, the three boys, their winter coats gaudy flowers against the dead, brown backdrop of the winter woods, laugh and call to each other as they scramble down a

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narrow trail that switches back across the slope and leads them to the water's edge, not ten yards from our position.

Standing at my father's back, I can only imagine his grimace at the prospect of being discovered. I have followed him mornings when we found most of his traps stolen, pulled up by their stakes, empty imprints in the mud where they were bedded. I have walked with him upon trapped foxes shot by hunters, their pelts ruined as they lay dead at the edges of fields, in the bare circles torn by a trap's radius of chain, torn by their struggle as the hunters approached. I have stood with him at the front doors of unfamiliar landowners as he endured lectures, denied permission to trap on their land. I have crouched low behind him to keep out of sight when shallow creek banks give onto open fields. I have watched him club trapped beavers, pin them beneath the water with sticks then wait for their silent struggle to cease rather than reaching for the .22 holstered at his waist, the crack of its report. I have had to lean closer to catch the whispered contents of jars he twists open, fish oil, peppermint or cherry oil, beaver castor, to hear him name the source of tracks pressed on sandbars and banks, of scat littering rocks that jut from the water. We wake to leave early, the morning still dark, so we can finish early, before many may rise from their beds to spot him at his work. When he parks his truck and kills the engine, he looks to make sure no headlights approach, cracks the door in the dim light of morning to listen for a distant engine, the crunch of tires on the gravel roads before bolting toward the cover of briars and scrubby growth leading down to the creek. I hustle behind him, stepping as he taught me on rocks and gravel, leaving no tracks pressed into mud, no evidence of our having walked there. His secrecy protects his traps, his catch, his ability to do what he loves without incident, but I also believe he takes pride in slipping undetected past dark and dormant houses that sit near to the creek, past others just beginning to stir, windows lighting as we walk by in the cold. I believe he enjoys slipping unseen and unheard past dogs that look out from the doors of their boxes, dogs that stand without barking at the ends of their chains. Now, for the first time in my experience on my father's trap line, we stand exposed as the three boys arrive to crouch and kick at the rocks at the water's edge.

The boys break low branches from a tree, dip the ends and fling water out toward the center of the creek, drops dotting the surface mere inches from where we stand, then crouch and produce muscular action figures and plastic robots from their coat pockets and stand them on the rocks facing each other, make them shuffle, collide. They scream and shake fingers pinched between collisions, pain amplified by the cold, but their voices are otherwise conspiratorial, hushed, the dialogues they create for their toys mysterious. One boy, the tallest,

turns from their play to look upstream and down. When his eyes pass over us, I watch for them to widen, his mouth to gape, I wait for him to jump, to scream, but I see no flicker of recognition, of awareness or surprise. Camouflaged in brown waders, brown coats, black gauntlets, Real-tree ball caps and carrying split hickory pack baskets, my father and I blend into the bare trees, the brown leaf litter, the black, wet rocks of the creek bed. The churn of current masks any whisper of our breathing, any chatter of our teeth as we stand in the cold water. Our exhaled clouds of breath join hands with the thin mist curling around us. We are two trunks rising from the water, my father's arm a single limb crooked skyward.

As I keep my head fixed to avoid betraying our presence, my eyes flit from the boys squatting at the creek bank to birds that light on the brush and branches, to sticks and debris that float toward us, pass by, to the gnarls of roots washed out under trees leaning over the water ahead, to the snagged and faded canvas of my father's jacket, the thin varnish of his pack basket, the creased and sun-browned neck above his corduroy collar, the gray hair curling around the snaps of his cap. A stack of fading photographs he keeps in his nightstand shows my father at twenty years old, a Marine serving his country in Vietnam. Stationed near the Rockpile in 1968, he is skinny, pale despite the sun, wears horn-rimmed glasses, his brown hair already thinning. Some photos show him in bunkers, trenches, foxholes, stacking sandbags, crouched behind sandbags he had stacked, holding an M-16. In some of the photos he wears a smile for his family; in others he looks serious, never scared, as he holds a pose while someone aims his Instamatic camera, perhaps counts to three. In one photo, the dense green of the jungle and round fronds surround him as he stands in a creek, some tributary of the Cam Lo River, his shirt off, washing. As he walked that foreign water, I wonder if fear caused his steps to come as unsteady as my own, if he stood on point with his fist clenched to warn his company of a threat up ahead. Did he imagine himself on this familiar stretch of Brown's Run, no son yet to daydream behind him, no house yet constructed at the crest of the slope above, the leaning trees perhaps still upright, their roots encased in soil before the water's cut, the slow work of weather and time?

Minutes slip past, slick and steady as the current, and we continue to stand, waiting and watching, my father's arm remains a right angle, his fingers locked in a fist. I know the burn he must feel in his deltoid, the numbness that needles his fingertips, recall walking laps with my teammates around the gymnasium at basketball practice, arms raised over our heads to condition us for defense, to impair opponents' vision, block shots, close passing lanes, the coaches walking beside us, watching for arms that quiver and wilt. Without coaches and

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teammates to chide him, I question what fuels my father's resolve. Does he see the boys on the bank, or some other, greater threat? Has he slipped out of time, returned in his mind to a setting where camouflage and silent communication were critical to survive?

Each November I have spent walking with my father as he sets his trap line on Brown's Run, I watch as he dips a gloved arm beneath the surface to lift large rocks from the water, their sides notched years before by his hatchet to hold sixteen-gauge wire and anchor his traps, the chipped grooves long since smoothed and blackened to match the rest of the rock's surface. He holds them up to me and he smiles, happy to find an old friend, to present evidence of having been here, having done this for decades, since before my age as I follow.

My father never speaks of his experience in Vietnam, the pictures in his nightstand the only record I have seen of his service, and I wonder what memories he keeps submerged, anchored in the murky depths, where the current stills and the bottom plunges deep. What visions of times without occasion to pause and pose for a picture does my father lift and secretly re-examine? What floats to the surface that he wants to forget? Just as we stand camouflaged in our clothing and gear, our stillness and silence, if he is ever shaken at home by a memory or flashback, he masks it with stoicism, never speaks in the mornings of having a nightmare, adopts a face like he wears in the photos, forces a smile, looks down at his lap and shrugs as Mom presses him to share stories when I was old enough to get interested in history, my father's experience. I wonder if sharing his past, hauling the memories up like rocks from the water, turning them over in daylight, can help him. I wonder if his choice to keep them submerged is an effort to forget, or perhaps to protect us from the horror of his experience. I think of my own secret thoughts of girls, my daydreams of dances, limited interest in trapping, how I yawn with my mouth closed as he speaks on the trap line to keep from disappointing him, to protect him from the truth just as our waders protect us from the icy water, our coats from the frigid air. We walk his trap line each winter, carrying our separate thoughts and memories that we work to conceal from each other just as we work to stay hidden from the dogs, the people waking in their homes, the boys crouched and playing on the bank.

A cold wind rises and the boys hunch together, lay down their toys to huddle their arms about themselves for warmth. My teeth rattle and my body trembles. The thrill of our invisibility wanes as the cold creeps deeper. Boredom and hunger begin to dominate my thoughts. Thick cloud cover obscures the position of the sun, prevents shadows to track the passage of time. I carry no watch, cannot risk the motion to check it if I did. Shivering in the cold, the passing seconds feel like

minutes, the minutes like hours, but my father's right fist stays high and steady. I wonder how long we will stand here, hiding in plain sight, how long he can last, begin wanting his arm to lower, to get on with our business, to finally be home. Surely the boys are aware of our presence. Surely they saw us when they looked up, when their eyes passed over our bodies. I begin to suspect that the words they whisper are not dialogue for their action figures but low-voiced concerns, theories about our intentions, about my father's raised fist, about why we stand here, staring for so long, watching them play. Despite my father's silent command, his raised fist's message to hold still, to stand another moment, and another, I begin to think about waving my arm, faking a sneeze or a cough I can claim could not be helped, something to set things in motion, to send the boys running and screaming for their house, to send us forward to the truck, to the rest of my day, until a woman's voice calls out from a window above, commanding the boys to get back to the house right now. They stand, pocket their action figures, and dart toward the path, sending a scree of leaf duff and dirt in their wake as they scramble up the slope. I watch as they open a basement door and dash into the darkness inside.

As the door closes behind them, my father lowers his fist, looks back at me and grins, happy to have protected his trap line, to have shown me how to become invisible with silence, persistence, and attire. He walks forward and I follow, glad to be moving, to be each step closer to the truck, the warmth of home, but I look back once more at the house, trying to find the mother's face in a window. Was there fear in her voice? Had she spotted us in the stream, watched us as we stood watching her sons? Is she watching us now from behind a sheer curtain, lights off to avoid revealing her silhouette, with wild eyes and her heart beating thunder in her chest? Will she caution her boys about what she has seen, or will she keep this a secret to protect them from fear, from some new curiosity that may drive them toward danger? How long might she peer from the window each morning to come, trying to spot motion, our camouflaged forms in the winter woods as we move slowly upstream, around the bend and out of sight?

