

Feed

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A pinwheel, a slowly moving windmill...no, more like a compass, the needle on a compass, slowly moving toward True North...or was it magnetic north? Or did it really matter anymore?

He lay there, floating lazily on the filmy surface of the pond, moving as little as possible. It didn't hurt if he didn't move, he'd discovered painfully, and in its own way it was almost soothing now, relaxing, as if it—whatever it was—was somehow anesthetizing him, preparing him in some bizarrely calming, if awful way for what was to come. Whatever *that* might be.

A faint pink tinge was beginning to redden the waters around his arms, which were almost grotesque now in their appearance, the hair long gone, the outermost layers of dermis slowly dissolving, the tendons and capillaries now easily visible through the holes of what was left of the sleeves of his flannel shirt, which wasn't much. Funny, his legs didn't seem nearly so affected...maybe the jeans were holding together better than the rest of his clothing. Those Diamond Gusset jeans...they were worth the extra money he'd spent on them after all. He'd had a little buyer's anxiety after having spent nearly a hundred dollars on two pair, especially when he could've gotten four or five pairs at Wally World for the same price. Still, they looked good—or, at least they *had*—and he couldn't deny that they'd held together well. Now more than ever, in fact. The boots too. Good investments, those. But ultimately...

A deeply lethargic feeling began to steal over him. The reddish shading of the water became more of an ochre as the stain spread.

It was very early in the morning when he left home. He'd planned to get out the door by 2 AM but it ended up being closer to three...which is pretty much why he'd aimed for two in the first place. It was a long drive to Monteagle, and he wanted to get there as close to sunrise as possible. The hike would be a long, hot one, and he wanted to get as many miles out of the way before it got unbearable down in the Gulf. Which would not take long; temperatures down there would soar to a gawdawfully muggy ninety-plus by ten or ten-thirty. He wanted to be on his way out, up the rugged Stagecoach trail by then. The last time he'd traversed that particular pair of boulder-strewn ruts laughingly referred to as a "path", it had taken him over an hour to cover a mile, and he was wholly knackered by the time he'd staggered to the top, pretty much finishing him for the day.

That had been an interesting trip. A thirteen mile loop into Cagle Gulf, around its northern verges, across and up to the eastern rim, then south and back down into it before a sweep back to the west across an amazing boulder field, and finally back out again. It had all the makings of a glorious day, but for some unexplained reason he had decided to carry a full pack, simulating an overnight hike without any intention of making one. It was a lot of weight to carry, and it slowed him down a lot more than he'd predicted, meaning that when late afternoon arrived and he was still on the South Rim,

he knew he was in trouble and wouldn't get out of the Gulf till after dark...bad mojo indeed, and, strictly speaking, against the law. You were supposed to be out of the area by dark unless you were camping, and you were supposed to have a permit for that. He didn't.

He *did* have a cell phone though, and somehow managed to get coverage long enough to make contact with his girlfriend, enabling him to tell her that he wouldn't be able to take her out for a late dinner as promised. She was not pleased and told him so, never mind that he was in trouble in the wilderness. He struggled back down into the gulf in the early evening wearing a headlamp (thoughtfully packed) and across the boulder crossing in darkness black as pitch. It was scary stuff; crossing the river on the swinging bridge was downright petrifying, especially laden as he was...the high center of gravity made him swing perilously with each step. The lights of the park rangers coming to...well, *rescue* him...not long after were welcome indeed. One of them, now a friend, even carried his pack on the way out.

He'd learned, though. No full pack this time, only the essentials in a "lumbar" pack: two water bottles and a water filter for refilling them, food for two meals, a couple of packs of energy "goo" (horrible-tasting, but undeniably effective) a first aid kit and other essentials along with, of course, the headlamp which he sincerely hoped he wouldn't need this time. Less than five pounds as opposed to nearly forty, and he was in significantly better shape now too. He planned to make good time.

And, of course, the early start. The nightmare trip had been in November, when the days were cooler, but shorter. In June it was pretty much the opposite in the South Cumberland, but if one hit the trail early enough when the temperatures were somewhat moderated, why, a dozen miles in the Gulf was eminently doable. He and a friend had done a crossover from Cagle Gulf to Lost Creek Gulf, a little matter of ten miles, the previous fall, and it had worked out just fine. Oh, the extra mileage would make a difference, to be sure, but starting two hours earlier and having an extra hour of daylight would help too. He felt pretty secure then as he parked at the trailhead outside of an obscure hamlet on the south side of the reserve.

The parking lot was deserted. No big surprise there. Spectacular as this place was, it was infrequently visited except for the truly hard-core types. *You see it once, you're only hammering yourself if you go see it again* was the general perception...and it couldn't have been farther from the truth as far as he was concerned. Cagle Gulf was in a constant state of flux, whether it was the variety of foliage from one part of the year to the next, the towering rock formations which seemed to look different each time he went...even something as simple as a couple of hours of rain would turn waterfalls from gurgling trickles to thundering cascades. No, it was never the same, and that was why he kept coming back.

He checked his watch. He'd made good time in the trip from Columbia, and it wasn't even six yet. Sunrise was probably a good half hour away. There was enough time to clear the breakfast debris from the car before hitting the trail. He made a point of stopping for Steak 'n' Shake on the way to the South Cumberland Reserve, eating a big burger and a large order of fries. Carbo-loading, he called it, never mind that it was more protein than carbs. It sat well enough on his stomach, and the boost always seemed to make for a good start to the day. Steak 'n' Shake (he called it "Steak 'n'

Snake") for breakfast, and a "monster" burger from Hardees for dinner, a reward for a job well-done. It was almost ritual.

A small square of blue cloth drifted past his face, a faint trail of bubbles in its wake. A bit of his flannel shirt, he figured, detached from the whole now and slowly coming apart as it passed. Was the fluid (for it was not water, surely) more caustic to organic materials than synthetics? Should he have worn the sweatpants after all? Would it have made a difference? Probably not.

A bowling shirt, that was what he was wearing over the flannel. Lord, how he had loved bowling—and wasn't it odd how he was already thinking in past tense?—he had taken it up seriously a little later in life than most folks, seeing it as a good way to get out and do something with his son, something that they both enjoyed. Turned out it was good exercise too. They bowled as a team, competing in a local league. As a lark, they'd had shirts made with their team name on the front, and their names embroidered on the back. It was over the top, silly, and expensive, but it was fun too, and it gave them just a little lift when they came out to play. They did pretty well too for a couple of rank amateurs, and by the time they had played out their second season they were playing in local tournaments, both as a team and individually. It had always pleased him to know that Jim seemed to enjoy himself so much. *God knows I didn't have a whole lot in common with him otherwise...*

More cloth now, whole swatches of the robin's egg blue of what was left of the sleeve, a Professional Bowler's Association patch still mostly intact. Not so intact was the dermis of his arms, almost gone now, almost transparent, in fact, the tiny blood vessels now spectacularly laid bare, an anatomy student's dream. Still carrying their meager bits of blood to its destination, for a little while longer, at least, they pulsed just a bit under their loads, like wires singing in a breeze. They would be silent soon enough. He supposed that were he to move his arms, just a bit, he could probably see the bones at the join of his elbows, the tendons connecting them. They'd always given him trouble, especially after eight or nine games of bowling. No more.

Weaker. He was getting weaker. Must be the blood loss, he thought. It was an off-hand kind of thing, not panicked at all, more of a musing sort of thought. So this is what it's like to die. Maybe it isn't so bad after all.

He'd always wondered, of course. Who doesn't? What is death, what is beyond? Granted, this was a hell of a way to find out—not at all what he'd expected—but, be fair, there were worse ways to go, sillier reasons for passing on. And then there was the thought that perhaps there was a greater purpose at work. That was what Ellen had told him, wasn't it? Or was it? He wasn't so sure now, the thoughts were coming more slowly now, a little confused. Something of a sense of intoxication now, the weakness combined with the insidious fluid in which he lay suspended, the odor, slightly sweet, that rose to the top of his head, had made it reel so.

A purpose, yes. A purpose. To everything, a purpose. That was Nature's way, after all. Nothing happened without a reason.

He was signing in at the trailhead kiosk when a set of headlights approached from out of the gloom. He was about to cuss—he really wanted to have the trail to himself—when he identified the vehicle as a State Park truck. Probably out to refill the

register, he thought. Good. It might be...yes, that was Ellen behind the wheel, Ellen Jamieson-George (he'd located her name on the internet) and they knew each other, had known each other since that ill-fated trip last November. He smiled at the ranger through the windshield, and the younger woman lifted a hand off the wheel in greeting.

He returned to the car as Ellen got out of the truck, a stack of register cards in her hand. "G'mornin' Dave," the ranger said cordially. "Nice to have you back."

He nodded. "Good to be here. You getting much business anymore?"

She smiled. "Not like *you*, Dave. At least you walked out on your own. You ever sell that pack?"

"Matter of fact, I did. You shoulda bit that night." As Ellen and her trail partner were guiding Dave out of the gulf in the dark last fall, he had offered to sell them his Kelty frame backpack...cheap. It was a spur-of-the-moment reaction to a bad trip, but had they offered him cash at that particular instant, they would've gotten a nice bargain on what was a fine pack. As it was, he sold it on eBay a few months later for a lot less than he'd paid for it. Not that he was so anxious to get out of backpacking, but he had decided subsequent to the trip that he just didn't like sleeping in the open. No need for such a pack, then. He bought a smaller one that could carry what he needed for day hikes, which was about all he ever did anyway, and it went everywhere with him.

The ranger eyed his register card. "Cagle Gulf to Stagecoach to South Rim. Seems we tried that once, didn't we?"

He grinned. "We did. No pack this time, though. Plus, I'm earlier." He pulled a bag from the car. "Here. I kinda figured I'd see you out here. A burger and fries from Steak n Snake. Breakfast of champions."

"Son-of-a-gun." Ellen smiled and took the bag from him. "I didn't get breakfast this morning. You must be a mind reader or something. Thanks, Dave."

"*De nada*. You don't get paid enough for what you do." He clicked his pack strap in place and took up his walking staff. "Gots to go now. I want to hit the trail as early as I can."

Ellen nodded. "Well, that's great Dave, but you know, it's not the...best time, to be out." There was a peculiar hesitation in her voice. "If you know what I mean. Lots of rain lately, the trails are slick as snot, especially along Rocky Creek. Center Falls was real bad. You might want to think about another hike today. Like Lost Creek Gulf. There's a new bridge there, see, keeps you out of the water, and..." She stopped, left the notion out there.

"Well, I really wanted to do this today," Dave replied. "It's like, I have something unfinished here, know what I mean?"

"Well, it's not as if it's going anywhere, Dave. How about the Gizz? You been up there? I hear the wildflowers down in the Fruit Bowl are just amazing this year."

He raised his eyebrows, a gesture lost in the darkness. "Been there, done that, nailed it shut. Three times, last time in a thunderstorm. Besides, it's summer. Think I'll stick to this one today...unless you're telling me it's off limits or something."

For a moment it seemed like Ellen was considering saying just that, then she seemed to relent...or, perhaps, resign. "All right Dave, suit yourself. Just...be careful. Especially around Fall Creek. Water's been way up there these past few days. Not a good place to...lose yourself, if you know what I mean."

He didn't, but that was okay. He knew the area well, had made three trips there already, and he knew of several alternate routes he could take around it if the water really was up. "Thanks, Ellen. Bon appétit. I'll check in after I'm done."

Ellen's expression was difficult to read, but it looked almost forlorn. But she shrugged and said, "No need. Just leave a note here." And without another word, the ranger got in her truck and left.

It was almost a metaphor for his strangely misbegotten life, this situation. How many times had he ignored warnings, warnings less subtle than the one he'd gotten this morning? How often had he strayed from a path—paths, really, as in plural—that would've led him to a comfortable living, a job, an education, a good woman who truly loved him? All too often, really. So it shouldn't come as such a surprise that he found himself in such a fix.

Other times, there may have been possibilities for rescue. His parents had helped with support, both moral and financial. A brother, a sister, the odd friend here and there...all had come through at one time or another, guiding him back to what passed for normal in a life that was usually anything but. Lately it had been his father. Call it a bad run of luck, Dave just couldn't seem to stay solvent. The child support was a big part of it, but he didn't mind that. The situation was what it was, he'd been unfaithful and his marriage had collapsed, leaving a child in the middle. Dave was determined the boy would lack for nothing, and so what if a bill or two had to remain unpaid because Jimmy had to have school clothes or new shoes or whatnot?

He often wondered if it be something basic wrong with him or his nature. Could it be blamed on any one incident in his life, something glaringly obvious, or was it something more subtle? A word not spoken, a gesture of some sort...what? Responsibility, his father had said, or rather, a lack of it. Take charge, take the blame, accept the consequences. Well, here he was, and he was doing nothing now if not accepting the blame for the situation and the consequences which now seemed inevitable.

It was with a light heart that he had set off down the trail, not thirty seconds after the headlights of Ellen's truck had disappeared down the chert lane. The Highland air was warm and sweetly scented with pine; the sun, still out of sight to the east, cast just the faintest purple glow on an overcast horizon. The skies appeared threatening, but the condition had persisted over the past several days and hadn't produced any storms of note, not here on the Plateau anyway. If it did rain, well, he was equipped for that too. And there were a few caves in which he could shelter if things got too intense. God knows he'd wished he'd had such options the last time he was at Fiery Gizzard. Rain poncho or no, he ended up thoroughly soaked. Still, you took what Nature threw at you, and you rejoiced in it. That was the difference in someone who sat at home watching TV all weekend and someone like him. He didn't see himself as *better* than the average couch potato, just different. And very different at that.

The first half mile was easy travel over a jeep trail that served as access for Park vehicles to the campsite ahead on the west side of the Gulf. A pleasant if unremarkable stroll, he took it at as fast a pace as he could manage. Time saved here could be critical later, as he'd found out last year. He even walked past the bright red sign reading,

"Warning: Copperheads often seen here" without a second glance. This was his fourth trip and either the venomous snakes were truly as shy as their reputations asserted, or they simply took no interest in him. He wasn't sure if he liked being an object of ignorance, but then he liked snakes and never had a problem with encountering one on the trail.

A bouncy reel by Clannad went through his head as he turned left at the trail junction and began down the long climb down into Cagle Gulf. It often happened that he fixated on a song as he hiked; more often than not it was some annoyingly repetitive pop tune. He hoped by listening to something more upbeat and obscure that he might avoid the dreaded earworms. He didn't figure to succeed, but it couldn't hurt to try.

Rocky Creek Falls was passed, a dark corner of the western Gulf made still darker by the overcast. Then down and around to Center Falls, where a new bridge spanned the creek. Funny, he thought, Ellen went on about how high the water was lately, but the volume over the falls wasn't so high. Besides, a new bridge (unnecessary, in his unstudied opinion) made getting across the rockfall dead simple. Perhaps too simple.

It used to be, and not so long ago, that this area was remote, very remote, to the point where there were comparatively few ways in and out. The Stone Gate, on the western arm of Lost Creek Gulf, that was one way...a great crack splitting the upper layers of sandstone and allowing a mostly safe entry. From there it was a long and grueling hike to the fertile bottomlands. That was how the natives and the inevitable wave of settlers had gotten down, anyway. Later, routes from the east, west, and south were pioneered and cut, including the Stagecoach trail he would be on later in the day, that rugged, rocky, switchbacking "road" that worked its way up to the east side of Cagle Gulf. That road had mostly been built by slave labor in the 1700s; now it seemed the state was determined to pave the way in and out...literally. This bridge was a prime example, a sturdy span of wire, steel, and wood. Nobody's Eagle Scout project, to be sure. Must be state, then. Progress? He wasn't so sure. Still, it did make for a quick escape for someone trapped in the Gulf...say, in the middle of the night, with a heavy pack, a tiring body, and a long walk out. Maybe there was something to be said for it after all.

Onward then, past Stable Branch Falls, which did seem to be a little bit more impressive than in past trips, but as always, its entire flow was quickly absorbed by the thirsty sinks just below its brink. Water never stayed on the surface very long here in Cagle Gulf, or anywhere in the bottomlands, for that matter. It all eventually rose somewhere along the course of Cagle Creek, where it eventually flowed into the larger Caney Fork River, and then into the Tennessee, then into the Ohio, and thence to the Mississippi and finally the Gulf of Mexico. It wasn't much of a stretch for him to imagine the progress of a drop of water sinking here and eventually ending up in the ocean. The circle of life, he supposed, yet another example of Nature taking its course. He was flawed like that, he often supposed, a surfeit of imagination. Real was real and beyond that, well, that was for him to decide. So he figured, anyway. What good was life if you couldn't conceive of something beyond the pale?

Muscle tissue unwinding now, tendons stretching, loosening. Loosen up, why don't you, you're so tight. That's what his friends used to say to him. Look at me now, he

thought with a wry grin. I won't get much looser than this...and when I do, it won't matter a whole lot by then...

At what point would he lose consciousness? He figured were he able to feel pain he probably would've passed out a long time ago, but he didn't, and he hadn't, so perhaps he would just gradually fade away. Gray out, he'd heard. Maybe that would be the end for him. Could be worse, he supposed.

His buoyancy did surprise him. Once the adipose tissue had dissolved away, as it mostly had already, he figured he would slip beneath the surface of the pond (or whatever) and drown. That would be painful, he supposed, but for how long? In his day as an EMT he'd had to recover a few drowned bodies, and they were rarely pretty, the faces frozen in an awful rictus of horror, obvious signs of a struggle in the vicinity. Not a way he particularly wanted to go. Somehow though, he knew that would not be a concern. He was certain he'd float as long as he needed to, perhaps for the last bit of consciousness to be drained from his psyche, and then...what?

Well, death, obviously. But then what?

And that was the question, wasn't it?

From Stable Branch (named for a horse pen which used to be sited at the base of the falls) he continued roughly north, the trail skirting the western wall of Cagle Gulf. He moved at a fairly zippy pace, the path familiar to him, stopping at odd intervals to have a look at some of the greenery. Had it been Spring this same trip might've taken a lot longer, but in late Fall it was not so spectacular. Interesting, but not the riot of wildflowers it might be otherwise. Besides, Ellen was right, for that sort of thing you went to Fiery Gizzard, or perhaps to the virgin forests at the bottom of Savage Gulf. Neither would be hugely pretty just now, but almost certainly better than they would be in Cagle. Still the attraction here was the varied scenery, particularly the rocks and cliffs and waterfalls. And the occasional cave, he thought as he paused for a drink from one of his water bottles. It was down to about half-full now, but there was a cave ahead where he could pump out and filter enough to fill it right back up. That was important, even in the relatively cool temperatures of the early morning.

Oh, there was plenty of water. That was never a worry. No, it never stayed on the surface for very long, but long enough. And as he stepped into a broadening arena of water, valley, and stone, he saw plenty of it.

Ellen hadn't been joking. The water really was up here in Fall Creek, where a usually small stream came down from the plateaus to the west, tumbled down a series of stairstep waterfalls, and eventually sank beneath the surface via a choked cave entrance on the north side of the valley. Wide open and spacious as it was, the cove was picturesque in a rugged sort of way, but he had always had a queer sense of unease here, as if something wasn't quite right, a prickling of the senses that usually told him to hasten along, ease on down the trail without a pause. He'd stopped long enough on one trip to take a few pictures, but none of them ever seemed to come out very well. An odd coincidence. But nothing more than that.

He chuckled and shook his head. Almost fifty years old and here he was seeing ghosts behind every rock. And in broad daylight.

Well, not exactly broad daylight. The thin clouds overhead had thickened somewhat, cutting the ambient light down, making the scene more gray than sunny. If it

stays like this I might have to cut this short, he thought. There wasn't any rain in the forecast, and it didn't look threatening at all, but you never knew up in the South Cumberland.

He sat on a felled tree for a momentary respite. He still had that odd urge to leave the area, but he hadn't had so much as a standing break since leaving Stable Branch Falls, so at least a breather was in order. He longed to remove his boots and dangle his feet into Fall Creek, but he already had such a stop planned at the "water hole" cave a little farther north, and it wouldn't do to make two stops, the extended daylight notwithstanding. Besides, it would mean a longer delay here, and that wasn't acceptable. He settled for a quick visual perusal of the area. Perhaps he would discern some reason for the strange unease he felt here.

There wasn't anything obvious. It looked like a lot of the bottomland in the Gulfs; lots of rocks strewn about atop alternately muddy and grassy areas, small washes coming in and feeding into Cagle Creek, the water quickly being funneled underground. It was rugged and somewhat bleak, but simultaneously verdant and alive. Except...

...except for one place.

It wasn't much, a small pond just off the main thrust of the Gulf. That's all it was: a pond, perhaps twelve to fifteen feet across, almost perfectly circular, surrounded by mud flats except where a small stream of water ran into it along a shallow channel off Fall Creek. Not very deep, it was probably up to his waist, maybe his chest in the very middle. The water probably filtered through the muddy bottom and directly into underground Cagle Creek.

He found himself staring at it. Odd. In a place so full of beauty and wonder, it was strange that this one otherwise insignificant feature should seem so...so *ugly*. Yes, that was it. Ugly. Ugly like a blemish on the face of a beautiful woman. Out of place. You didn't want to stare, but somehow your gaze was always drawn to it. Right now, right this minute he was staring at the surface of the pond, looking at an unnatural sheen of something oily swirling slowly. So slowly.

At least that was natural, the pace of that movement. That seemed right, at least. Something moving at a pace something other than frenetic. It was, in its own way, calming.

He sat on the trunk of a dead tree, looked at the pond, kept on looking. The rainbow sheen held him in some kind of thrall, and for the first time since he'd arrived here in this place, he didn't mind pausing.

I wish I could stay here.

He wasn't quite sure where the thought had come from, but there it was. A sort of an unspoken desire, something from the very heart of him, something deeply honest.

Honest, yet in its own way just as ugly as this pond. To stay here, that would be a betrayal of the worst kind, of his family, his son, life as he knew it...he would be walking away from all of that were he to stay here. Still, probably it didn't hurt to indulge a fantasy, weird as it was...what would he do here were he to remain? How would he live? A hermit in the Gulfs, communing with the animals? Maybe hiding from the hikers, rare as they were, perhaps destroying the trails and bridges, the things that made it so easy for them to come?

Yes, he might do that.

Food. He supposed he'd have to have food. Man must feed, after all, not any differently than anything else created by nature. Perhaps he'd find some way to graze, locate plants, roots, berries, learn to forage. Spring, summer, fall, surely it was verdant enough here then, but winter...

He grinned. Sure. He'd last that long. Suburban living had made him soft. He might last a few weeks, maybe a month, then he'd be staggering up the trail, back home. If they took him back in at that point, anyway. Of course, he'd have been located by then anyway, Ellen knew he was here if no one else did, and she knew this place better than anyone, the little bowers one could secrete themselves if there was no other shelter...

He stood, stretched, yawned and smiled, still looking down at the surface of the pond. Ellen. Ah yes, Ellen. Sleek, sylph-like, weathered face, short-haired and bright-eyed Ellen, who was always around it seemed. He'd never had anything but a nodding relationship with her, but oh, he'd thought about it, sometimes down here in the Gulfs. She was no one's idea of a raving beauty, but there was something about her, something raw, something wild, like the land over which she served as steward. You might come to some sort of terms with her, but you'd never completely understand her. That made her mighty appealing to him.

Somewhere down here, he thought, down here where the scenery was at its most crude, most harsh and unforgiving...maybe on one of those great slabs of rock that made up the dry bed of Cagle Creek, maybe up in the sandy mouth of Schwartz Spring, maybe here, right here, here in this...

...pond...

It hadn't taken much, just a momentary loss on concentration. He'd never been all that sure on his feet and a tumble or two on a trip was usually a given. Sometimes he'd even get wet...like he was now.

The ripples were just dying down. He scrambled to get some purchase for his feet, simultaneously grabbing for the small electronics pouch (mostly water-resistant) velcro'd to his pack belt. It pulled off with a muffled ripping noise, and he held it above his head, shaking it furiously to drain it just as his toes found a bottom of sorts. It was more muck than solid ground, but it was better than nothing. Still off balance...the pack might be submerged again—along with the rest of him, but never mind that, save the electronics, save the electronics! Throw the pack, then, somehow out of the pond...over by that scraggly little tree, that would do...

Now. Deep breath, compose...feet down, just touching bottom...

...and sinking...

Panic. No, that wouldn't do. Relax, relax...even with the boots and clothes he would float. Hadn't he passed drown-proofing in the Marine Corps the first time, even when he proved wholly inept at virtually everything else they tried to teach him? He certainly wasn't about to die in a small pond not much bigger than a child's wading pool, was he?

He worked his way toward the side of the pool, searching for a little firmer footing. Bit by bit, slowly, as if he were in quicksand (which he might as well be, face it) deliberately, and then he was more or less secure, first on his toes and then flat-footed. The water was chest deep, a lot deeper than it had looked from out there, there on the

dry ground, where he'd been standing just a minute or so ago. That ground that had earlier looked so sinister sure did look awfully inviting now.

Well, never mind. He was on his feet now and surely it would be easy enough to work his way out of this mess. The bank was only a few feet away, after all. He carefully edged his way in that direction.

Funny, it didn't seem to be getting any shallower, even as he approached the side. He looked around. Yes, it was rather steep-sided, except on the one side where the water was slowly trickling in from Fall Creek Hollow. There it was rather shallow, but looked muddy.

It was. *Very* muddy. In fact, a few steps in that direction he found himself in the same sort of suck-mud that had so panicked him just a minute or so before. He quickly moved back to the relatively firmer ground...and deeper water.

At least it wasn't cold. That was a plus. The water coming out of the hollow would've been pretty chilly in November, and hypothermia was a serious hazard this far from civilization. But in June the pool felt downright comfortable and he might've considered a prolonged dip if not for the circumstances.

So. How to get out? The sides of the pool, steep as they were, didn't look to be a very good option, but he tried anyway, and as he figured, the edges quickly crumbled away under pressure and left him on something of a muddy, gravelly treadmill. Maybe...maybe over there, by the base of that tree, the one he'd used as a target for his camera case, maybe there there'd be a root or something onto which he could cling, get some purchase. He started in that direction before a familiar voice stopped him in place, saying, "This is some fix you're in, isn't it Dave?"

He craned his head, and yes, it was Ellen. Leave it to her to come to his rescue again.

"We've got to stop meeting like this, Ellen."

"Uh huh." She smiled kindly.

He pointed to where he'd set his walking stick next to the fallen log. "I seem to be stuck in here. If you could just give me a hand..."

"I wish it was that simple," she sighed.

That was a strange thing to say. "It *is* simple. Just get hold of that stick, and give me a pull. That'd get me out of here, sure enough."

"I wish it was that simple," she repeated, looking away from him, almost uncomfortably. "But it's not so bad. So I understand, anyway. As long as you don't struggle. So relax, Dave. Maybe we can talk a while before..." Her voice trailed away as her eyes followed the flight of a raptor coasting in a thermal above them.

He looked at her, part confusion, part amusement. "Hey, I'm not kidding, I could use a hand here, you know."

She didn't reply for a moment, her gaze still fixed on the sky. After a pregnant pause, she finally murmured, "Do you know, they were going to put houses up on the south side of Powder Gap."

"Huh?"

Now she looked down at him. "Condos, Dave. Some dillholes from Indiana were buying up property on the south side of the Gap, and they were going to put houses there."

"What, like at the Gizz?" There were several high-dollar homes built overlooking Fiery Gizzard Cove. To say they spoiled the view from the bottom would be a vast understatement. That the first thing you saw from the Raven Point Overlook was some Jack staring at you through a telescope...well, it made the whole exercise of the long walk and the grueling climb seem pretty silly.

"*Exactly* like at the Gizz. Only, more of 'em. Can you imagine, hiking up Powder Gap with people looking down on you from their balconies, martinis in their hands?" She held her hands up to the sky, as if calling the great bird for guidance. "I swear, sometimes I just don't get what this world is coming to."

"I know what you mean," he said sourly. "I think I stopped being really happy in 1980. Things have just gotten more and more screwed up since then."

"People just don't have any respect for Nature anymore," Ellen continued. The capital N in Nature was more than emphasized. "I mean, look at this place. So much beauty, so much wonder, so much *life*, and all they can think about is how to profit from it."

"Sure. Sure. Look, Ellen..."

"Oh, the state is at least partly to blame. They didn't have a chance to buy the adjacent property as a buffer at the Gizz, but they did here. And they almost *blew it*. If it weren't for..." She stopped again, looked down at him. "*Condos*, Dave. *Condos* at Powder Gap. And that would only be the start. You give them a foothold, the developers, the loggers, and they're like kudzu...they just keep creeping on till they overwhelm everything. Well, that's not going to happen here. That's being seen to."

"Ummm...that's...that's fine, Ellen. Just fine. But do you think maybe you can give me a hand here? I'm kinda stuck. In here." He pointed at the water. "The sides are too crumbly, and the shallow side is a quagmire."

"Kind of a metaphor for life, huh Dave?" She shook her head. "It's a terrible thing. You, of all people. I tried to warn you, Dave. Tried to warn you not to come down her. There's times when it's just not...healthy. For you, I mean." She looked impossibly sad. "But it's all a part of the natural order. It has to feed, just like any other living thing. I'm just sorry it has to be you."

He shook his head violently, not sure if he'd actually heard that last sentence. "Feed? Is that what you said? Feed?"

Now she looked thoughtful. "There's plans for a scenic parkway not too far from here," she said. "We're going to work on that next. What's here now, it's not so bad. Even the new bridges aren't all that damaging. No one really minds if people come here to appreciate things, Dave, so long as they do it with the proper reverence. But something that would bring more, less understanding people here, and *keep* them here..." She put her hands on her hips. "No, that won't do. Won't be allowed. You can count on that, Dave. And you...this...will help. In its own way, it'll help."

She walked over to stand beside the ash-grey remnants of the tree that stood beside the pool. "I guess what it all comes down to, Dave, is that I can't help you. If you can get yourself out, then more power to you. But if you can't..." She shrugged, a mute but telling gesture.

"Fair enough." He groped around in the mud beneath the tree until he felt a stout enough root. "I may look silly doing it, but I've gotten myself out of tougher spots before."

He took hold of the root with one hand, planted his other as high up the side of the pool as he could, then shifted his weight, trying to vault his way out.

Except that what he had hold of was not a root. *Still* had hold of, once he pulled himself back above the surface of the pool again.

He examined what he held. Had he not been dehydrated, he might've pissed his pants. It was a bone. He was no expert, but it looked like a femur.

"There's lots of them," she said absently. "It's funny. Sometimes it'll leave nothing behind, nothing at all. Sometimes a skeleton. And sometimes it takes a long, long time." She shuddered. "Once I swear I could hear the screaming all the way up at the Stone Gate Ranger Station. That was *awful*."

And now, finally, he saw the real gravity of his situation. He became frantic, began pawing at sides of the pool, trying to somehow scramble up, shredding nails and skin, making a little progress, then inexorably sliding back down...

...and then, then the pain hit. Excruciating, boiling pain, like a dip in hot water...no, *acid*, and it just got worse, the more he struggled...

And he stopped, relaxed, ceded. Hadn't she said something along those lines? That it wouldn't hurt if he didn't fight it?

Just that quickly, it didn't. He sighed.

Ellen gave him a relieved smile. "Thank you, Dave. I really didn't want to see...that."

He saw the bird circling overhead. It wasn't a buzzard, but it might as well be. Or perhaps it was. His eyes had been pretty far gone even before this. So, did he end up as vulture food or plant food?

What a way to go, he laughed. Trapped in what amounted to the geologic equivalent of a pitcher plant, slowly being digested as feed for...?

For what, then? "At least tell me what this is all about," he asked Ellen, who still stood next to the pool watching him with a serene smile on her face. "Why and for what?"

"I already told you the why. The *what*..." She held out her hands helplessly. "I can't tell you anything that you won't know yourself in a little while anyway. What you probably know already, here." She patted her heart. "There's a greater purpose at work here, Dave. Know that, and know that you're a part of it."

"A reluctant part."

"Doesn't matter. And just how reluctant are you, really? You came here of your own free will, against my advice. You walked right into it, Dave, and you even gave a thought to *staying* here. I know you did, I heard it. Well, now you will."

"I suppose you can read my thoughts too, then."

"Call it a perk of the job." She smiled and blew him a fond kiss. "I know what you were thinking about me, too. Sorry. Would it make you feel any better to know that you're not the first, you probably won't be the last, and if I wasn't already spoken for, I'd probably have at least considered it?"

"I guess it'll have to, won't it?" The edges of his vision began to swim out of focus.

"It's all right, Dave," she said softly, kneeling at the edge of the pool. "Just close your eyes and let it happen. It won't hurt, I promise."

"What...about my family?" His voice surprised him with its growing weakness.

"What about them? The body is temporary, you know that, don't you? Only this," she motioned around her, "is eternal, Dave. So they'll wonder, they'll grieve, maybe they'll eventually understand, but then Dave, then they'll forget you. That's how it works, that's how life is. So, just let go."

She was right, of course. There was no escape. And at this juncture there wasn't any point anyway. A single move and he was just as liable to go to pieces. Literally. And they *would* forget. Maybe they already had.

"Do you know?" He looks up, sees her in startlingly clear focus for just an instant, sees her smiling. Or maybe it isn't her. It doesn't look like her. It looks like...

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, I do. And you will too. Be at peace, Dave."

And he is.

An instant of violent, blinding pain as what is left of his limbs separate from his body, the pool—not water, after all, of course not—turns shocking red...and his eyes are sightless.

The blood, the entrails, the remaining tissue, the bones all sink to the bottom, where they are all reduced to their elements, then are absorbed into the earth from which they sprang, where they will provide sustenance, nourishment. Even the synthetic clothing is taken; it just takes a little longer.

Nature claims one of her own, and nothing is wasted.

Hours, days pass.

The car is found, the area searched. Nothing is found, not a trace. In a remarkably short time he *is* forgotten, even by those who loved him the dearest.

But the spirit...

There is no moral to this story. There are no answers to be found at Fall Creek Sink, which is a real place and very much as described. Don't bother looking; it's not what you think.

Or maybe it is.