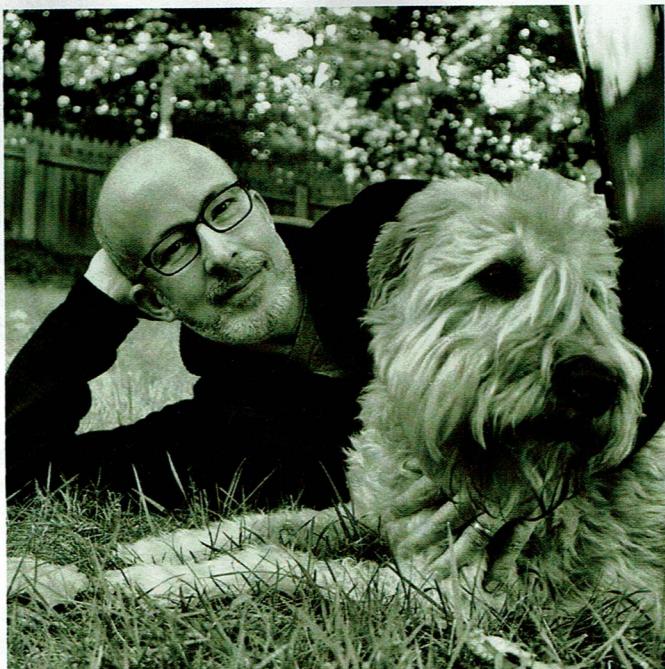


FIRST PLACE WINNER
2020 SHERIDAN ANDERSON MEMORIAL SHORT STORY CONTEST



The Rogue

GARY J. WHITEHEAD

Two hundred miles south of here the chambered weight of all my culpability resists the current of a river, though by now it has probably crawled under sand and gravel like a giant crayfish, like a thing with claws. Strange to think that for years it has lain submerged in the peace of that canyon amid songs of water ouzels and wrens, keening of eagles and ospreys, croaking of blue herons; and beneath the talkative river the silent, watchful traffic of anadromous fish. After all these years maybe it's not there at all. Maybe the river, embarrassed abettor, rolled it into the Pacific. But I know that's not true. No, it's part of that river now, just as that river's part of me, and with Mike dead and me here with no one to tell, there's only the river's clean water rushing through those round chambers to offer me final absolution.

It was almost thirty years ago when Mike came to the house to save me. He said the river was called the Rogue, and that suited me just fine, said it would take us six hours to fly there. This was a week after the inquest and two days after Jenny had left, and he'd found me in the empty house holding an empty bottle and the photo of Chloe and me, the one Jenny had taken two years before on a ferry to Martha's Vineyard. In the picture I have a sunburned nose and Chloe's got a lock of her black hair pasted across her face in a slash. She's five. She's smiling. She's alive. Mike described the river, the cabin we'd stay in, his eyes darting to the instrument of my torment, which I'd arranged at the center of that stained table like a three-dimensional question mark, like an invitation. I've often thought that he came up with the idea for our trip to the Rogue right there on the spot. "It'll do you good," he said. "Hell, it'll do me good, too."

"Let's drive there."

"Then it'll take us six days. Six back, too."

"That's okay. There's something I need to do, and a plane just won't work." Rubbing my thumb against the stains in the dim blue light of the bug zapper flashing like heat lighting in the backyard, I told him what I had in mind, my slurred sentences punctuated by the crackle and hiss of white moths incinerated to ash. We'd be cops breaking a federal law and I'd be in violation of my probation, but I no longer cared about right and wrong. My blue uniform, the one I'd always been so meticulous about, snipping loose threads and keeping cleaned and pressed, lay half-charred and soaked with Ronsonol lighter fluid behind my shed. And Mike, my partner of ten years, was willing to be an accessory.

It took us only four days to get there. I couldn't sleep and twice drove straight through the night, no radio, just the sounds of the engine, the wind, Mike's choked breathing. Every now and then I expected to hear dispatch crackle through the cab calling us to the next new tragedy. But I'd stepped out of our unit three weeks ago and I'd never climb in one again. I saw deer like apparitions crossing the yellow-lined highway, their eyes shining green discs. Felt the change in landscape, altitude. In Nebraska a wind trying to push Mike's truck off the road, and tumbleweeds by the thousands running like herds. In the ashtray the mangled corpses of cigarettes piled high. On patrol we'd never been allowed to smoke in the unit, and this was back when you could smoke anywhere—planes, movie theaters, restaurants. Any smell of cigarettes, any sign of ash, and the sergeant would have a fit. He said it was unprofessional. That his old man had died of lung cancer. Smoking while driving was a luxury, and Mike, though he didn't smoke himself and though it was his truck, never complained. Flat plains, combines inching along them like huge bugs, gave way to mountains, snow-capped even in September. Then the fat shiny snake of the Columbia River far below us. Portland. Roseburg. Unsigned roads past lumber mills into a deep forest of firs.

The cabin belonged to a college friend of Mike's. Fifty miles from any neighbor. No electricity. An intricate gravity-fed water system from a spring. Hot water from solar panels and copper coils in the wood stove. A fenced garden. A fifteen-minute

walk down a steep trail to the Rogue. We lit the propane fridge, unloaded our coolers, threw our sleeping bags in the bedroom. The place smelled of old, dry pine and woodsmoke. Above the kitchen sink there was a rattlesnake skin. Hanging from one rafter the bleached jaw of a horse or mule. Atop bookshelves tooth-shaped pieces of driftwood, feathers, stones. I joined Mike on the deck where he stood leaning on a rail. "You look like hell," he said.

"I'm familiar with the place." We could hear bats in the cedar shakes of the cabin walls, restless and squeaking. Far down in the meadow two mule deer crept. We were looking out at mountains eight, maybe ten, miles away.

"We've got three hours till dark. Let's go fishing."

Back when we worked dog shift Mike had taken me fly-fishing half a dozen times upstate on the Ausable and once on the Delaware, and I'd never caught a thing. On one trip we'd hiked through two miles of brambles to get to a back eddy he knew. Scratched and bleeding, he'd grinned at me, his short red moustache beaded with sweat. "You gotta have the love, partner." Though I hadn't gotten it yet, I could see how one might. The things you saw were enough to make you want to come back, fish or no fish. Dragonflies and butterflies, moss on rocks, foamy whorls, the smooth hands of the river rubbing the shore. One late summer day, standing in neoprene waders in the cool Delaware, I watched a bald eagle swoop down, swing its legs and lift a fish in its talons. As discouraged as I'd get, I liked the feel of a river hugging my legs like a child, the sound of its gurgling. I liked the rocks under the current like so many colored eggs. Out on patrol, Mike often talked about fishing. The life cycle of the mayfly and caddis, how a hatch worked, how to read a river. "Imagine you're a fish," he said once. "All day and all night you've got this current to contend with and meanwhile predators all around."

"You talking about fish or people?"

"No difference. Where would you go?" He moved a toothpick from one side of his lips to another.

"The coffee shop?"

"...He said the river was called the Rogue, and that suited me just fine, said it would take us six hours to fly there.

This was a week after the inquest and two days after Jenny had left, and he'd found me in the empty house holding an empty bottle and the photo of Chloe and me, the one Jenny had taken two years before on a ferry to Martha's Vineyard. ..."

"Piss off. Come on now, I'm trying to teach you something. Valuable life lessons here."

"Thing is, buddy, you can't go anywhere. Something's always trying to lure you out. Perps. Psychos. Beaks. Bright feathers hiding something sharp and snelled."

"It's no wonder you never catch any."

"Okay. I'd go to the bottom where no one could see me."

"You'd get tired there," he said. "Trust me."

And now, walking the steep trail through Douglas firs and trees he called madrones, looking at the rolls of skin at the back of his red buzzed head, pulled down toward the river by gravity and his kindness and my own despair, I knew what he'd meant. I knew the bottom well. I'd seen the splashes of blood. When it enters a head, a bullet makes a tiny hole, nothing too gory. It's when it exits that it shows the real damage. There's the gaping maw, the bits of gray matter in the curtains, the fine spray on the walls and floor. I'd seen more than a few poor citizens who'd gone that way. But it's different to come home and see it on your own back porch. To come home and smell the burnt powder lingering in the kitchen, see the slumped body, the red river.

"Listen to that," Mike said. We stopped and as our breathing slowed I heard it, like a scanner's white noise only liquefied and amplified through a canyon.

"The Rogue."

"The Rogue."

You get tired at the bottom, tired in the strong current of having sunk too far to care, and you feed instead in the places of least resistance. Pools, pockets, back eddies. Bottles, pills, suicide. Mike knew that, and so he'd taken me here, given me the slack I needed. As we walked the sandy path to the river, he told me this would be a whole different kind of fishing. No hatches to worry about, no matching of pattern and size to those insects dancing about. "They call 'em 'half-pounders' but they're more like a couple or a few. Young steelhead, sea-run rainbow trout come back to their home river. And hungry. Voracious. They take flies readily. We're using a pattern invented by my buddy's father, a surgeon. It's all you'll need. Here's a box with a half-dozen. If any rafters ask, just say it's a Coachman. We're talking top secret. I'll show you how to tie one tonight."

"...I pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked onto emptiness. Pulled again and again. Pulled a dozen times, stood up dripping and cold, and then hurled the Colt into the middle of the pitiless river. The Rogue. ..."

place, let me get set up, waited while I fed the line through the guides, tied on one of the orange-bodied flies, and made my first awkward cast. On my second, which I let dead drift until the line made a wide arc beyond a submerged rock, I saw the fish turn, its silver flank shining at the surface, felt the sharp tug. "Keep it taut. Reel in the slack. There you go," he coached from behind me. While I reeled, the fish cleared the water with a thrash. It dove, thrashed again, and then I lifted it flopping

onto the rock. I held its cool, shiny, slimy, muscular body in my hands. "Its adipose is clipped. See? A hatchery fish, a keeper. Bonk him against the rock." Even as I thwacked its head, saw the blood splash and thought of Chloe, even as I felt the fish leave this world, I entered it, again, the first time in weeks. I'd taken a life and gotten a bit of my own back. But just a bit. I cradled that steelhead, that "half-pounder," studied the scars in its bright-scaled sides, the pink plate in front of its gills, the black spots on its back, the yellow ring around the black mirror of its iris, and I didn't care that Mike was there to see me sob.

That first night, the cabin full of the singular smell of fish fried in butter, Mike hardly talked though I knew he would have liked to. While I smoked out on the deck and watched the stars blink on, he lit a fire in the woodstove, lit the propane lamps, heated water for the dishes in big kettles. Later, he clamped a vise to the table and opened a cookie tin with a Christmas scene on its cover, pulled out sandwich bags of colored feathers and threads, the white tail of a cow, size 8 hooks, and with hardly a word showed me how to tie the fly.

The next day it rained and we played cribbage, our counting after a while a kind of song: *fifteen two, four, and a run makes a dozen; fifteen two, four, and no more.* Inside: smoke and body odor, coffee and scotch. Outside: fog, like an anesthetic. In the afternoon, while Mike worked at the vise, I rummaged through the bookshelves and found a binder with the collected slogans of Burma-Shave, those roadside signs of my youth, signs some marketing genius had dreamed up. On family trips, my father, a cop and the son of a cop, would laugh out loud at these signs. My mother would shake her head, but from the back seat I could see her grinning. When we saw one up ahead, my father would slow the car so we could read them. Now here they were, hundreds of them, collected in a binder. Then I read this one—*"She put / A bullet / Thru his hat / But he's had / Closer shaves than that / Burma-Shave"*—and I closed the book, slid it back into the shelf.

Mike never brought up what was in the gym bag on the couch, the reason I'd agreed to come here, the thing designed to take lives and not give them back.

It had taken its first my fourth year on the job, and Mike had seen it all, had told Internal Affairs afterward the shooting had been clean, by the book. We'd been 10-23 to a reported B&E in progress, Midtown, had encountered the perp climbing down a fire escape in a dark alley. "POLICE!" I shouted. "FREEZE, GODDAMIT!" And then he dropped, quiet as a cat, behind a box and I heard the click, unmistakable—the cock of a .45. I fired twice, just as I'd been taught at the Academy. Jessie Kinsella, 19, of no known address. The IAB detective on the scene found the loaded .45, a Colt, beneath the body. The coroner's report indicated the presence of amphetamines in his bloodstream, listed the cause of death as GSW to the aorta and right lung. The bosses mandated a visit to the Department psychologist, a joke of a guy, mustard in his beard, grease stains on his tie. The week after that Mike took me to the range, forced me to confront what he knew I'd need to if I wanted to stay on the job. Mike knew about killing. He'd done a tour in Vietnam, had been a helicopter gunner, had mowed down more VC than he could count. Miraculously, I'd gotten a deferment. "It won't go away," he told me one night downing shots of Johnny Walker Black at Pete's in Pearl River, a cop hangout. "So don't bother trying. You live with it. Like angina."

I'd never needed to use it again, though I'd drawn it a few times and would have. More than likely I would have used it on myself, if Mike hadn't come to the house two nights after Jenny left. God knows I considered it a viable option and maybe still did even as we sat there listening to the rain on the cabin roof and the silent voice of the blue gym bag begging to be unzipped.

That night I slept without waking, without dreaming, or if I did they were dreams I couldn't recall. I woke to the raving of Steller's jays, what I imagined to be a family of them, their shrieks ratcheting me up and out of bed to peer out into the fog-filled canyon. It was cold. Mike hadn't yet risen. I made a fire in the woodstove, fatwood and crisp split madrone. I filled a kettle and set it on the stovetop, turned and there it was, out of the gym bag and on the arm of the couch looking as clean and new as the day they'd given it to me. My Colt Trooper .38. My gut lurched and I tasted acid. I blinked, breathed, steadied myself on a chair. Why? Why would he do that? And then I knew. He'd taken me here so I could make a choice. Shit or get off the pot. Die, or go on living. After Jessie Kinsella, I'd compartmentalized the experience. I'd found places inside me for the shock, the guilt, the sorrow that had shaken me so badly in the days immediately following. When I could hardly light a cigarette for the shaking of my hands, Mike had taken my Zippo and held it for me. One snowy night a few weeks after the shooting, he'd wheeled our unit back into that alley and walked me to the fire escape. "It's like casting a fly, buddy. You go too far back and you've got no power. Keep it just past midnight, one o'clock, have some line to shoot, and just let go. Capiche?"

I took the kettle off the stove so the whistle wouldn't wake him, slipped on my hiking shoes, lifted the .38 and saw the golden eye of the one bullet Mike had loaded, all I'd need if it went down that way. The jays had flown off but the fog hadn't; it misted my face as I walked. I could just make out the trail between ferns and bay laurel, firs and madrones and sugar pines, trees whose names I'd come to learn. The gun swung in my right hand. I saw bear scat, purple with blackberry seeds. Halfway down, I heard something crash to my left, and it quickened my already spiked pulse. I had the gun, but I wasn't sure if it would stop a bear. And a cougar? I wouldn't even get off the shot. I could hear the river now. The fog was a shroud and there was no mourner but me. Then I was sinking in sand that gave way to slippery black rocks, then icy water. I didn't take off my shoes but waded to my knees, then knelt, felt the cold water at my chest, the gun at my head. I closed my eyes.

And saw Chloe.

She looked surprised when she called and I didn't answer. My car was in the driveway. Her friend Becca's mother had seen it there, and so dropped Chloe off. "Daddy?" I heard her call, but I didn't answer. I was several blocks away standing in a convenience store reading a magazine. I'd gone there to buy cigarettes, but I was thumbing through a magazine, looking at pictures of our beleaguered president. When she went to our bedroom and saw my uniform on the bed, the heavy utility belt with its set of handcuffs, nightstick, mace, the black leather

holster holding the mysterious gun, the one I always kept under lock and key; when she unsnapped the snap, took hold of the walnut grip; when she held the revolver with both hands and said "Bam, bam;" when she carried it out onto the screened-in porch; when she clicked off the safety; when she turned it over in her hands and looked into the barrel; when one of her fingers, one of her sweet little fingers pulled the trigger, I was standing in Cumberland Farms looking at photos of Richard Nixon in *Life* magazine.

I pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked onto emptiness. Pulled again and again. Pulled a dozen times, stood up dripping and cold, and then hurled the Colt into the middle of the pitiless river. The Rogue. I reached in my breast pocket and took out the bullet I'd put there with the photograph, threw the bullet in the river, too, and then sat back on the sandy beach. In the photo Chloe is smiling. She's five. She's alive.

When I found her on the back porch she wasn't. I remember repeating the word "No" over and over, lifting her limp body in my arms the way I had so many times when she'd fallen asleep

on the couch. I remember rocking her, patting her matted hair. It took me a long time to put her down, to pick up the phone. The ambulance, I knew, was useless, but they sent one anyway. Then the house was full of guys I knew—city cops and local—radios crackling, red and blue lights pulsing through the windows. Mike showed up, his palm rubbing his buzzed red hair, his eyes looking old and scared. Then there was Jenny. Her mouth twisted, her jaw trembling, her eyes wild. I went to hug her and she slapped me hard on the ear. Slapped again and again. Slapped a dozen times until Mike grabbed her arm, said, "Enough."

What do you say? Sorry? That night, do you climb into bed together, click off the lamp

and say goodnight? Make coffee in the morning? I remember Mike's sister, Lisa, helping Jenny up from the back porch floor, taking the blood-soaked sponge and wringing it in the sink, giving Jenny a sleeping pill. Mike and me sitting in silence in the dark living room until birds started chirping and the light crept in like some false hope.

I knelt in the river, rogue and Rogue, and the rain came again, but it's not so easy to be cleansed. It takes a lifetime. We'd planned to stay at the cabin a week, but it turned into two, then three, Mike calling from the radio phone to put in for more lost time. And me? I resigned and never went back. I had my things shipped to my new place, a small house not far from the Rogue, upriver, where the water was cold and the fish liked to hold. And through two more marriages and three more children, I fished that river, casting out and stripping in, hoping for the feel of something living at the end of a weighted line.

