

1.

North Pass Marsh Near Sandpine Key

The moon darted behind one cloud and then another, shrouding the marsh in near total darkness at times, and then in its journeys between clouds briefly illuminating acres of marsh grass punctuated with tiny islands outlined by bayberry and sometimes topped by a few towering loblolly pines. Trent crouched in the jon boat, paying little attention to what was at one moment seen and minutes later not seen. Instead, his thoughts were of the recent past and the issue building between him and the adults in his family.

He was on a mission. It had become increasingly clear to him that his parents just didn't get it. They didn't realize that he was nearly fifteen years old and capable of doing anything a full-grown man could do. And why did they insist on treating him like a child and at the same time expecting him to do any chore that came to mind just because they told him to do it? Anyone with his size and strength could earn a decent wage for the things they made him do for free—things like scraping boat bottoms and slopping on anti-fouling paint. A marina would charge dearly for work like that, and as soon as he was old enough, he would be looking for work at the Pine Cove Marina...and getting fairly paid for his efforts. It wasn't even work for no pay he found so irritating—it was the lack of respect.

Just last week his parents and his uncle Harvey—not a real uncle, only his mother's brother-in-law—had been in the living room drinking and shooting the breeze. Out of the blue Harvey had told him to go get him another beer. Trent could feel the hairs stand up on his neck, but like a wimp had gotten the beer for his uncle. If it had been in a glass he would have spit in it, but Harvey was drinking out of the can and Trent could only fume. That son of a bitch! Even now the words echoed in his head;

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earlier he had formed them under his breath, and later said them out loud when he knew he was well out of earshot.

Now his parents were out for another evening at the Pine Haven Tavern, and the time had come for this mission—to make them realize that he was his own person. When they got home from the tavern they would find him gone.

He hoped they would worry when they discovered he wasn't there, and they might even notice that the jon boat was missing too. When he did return, he would tell them that he had just decided to go out and do a little fishing, or maybe he would say nothing—let them figure it out. They knew that he could find his way around the marsh as well as almost anyone. However, he needed to make them realize that he was capable of running his own life—even if that meant spending the night on the marsh whenever he felt like it. Perhaps they would even panic and blame themselves when they found him missing, and if they did they might begin to notice that he had become a perfectly able person with a mind of his own.

Whether or not he was successful in getting his parents' attention, he would be back in time for school. He had a few friends, but most lived in town and once he boarded the bus, those friends would not be seen again until the next school day. He would enjoy seeing them, but he didn't go to school to be with his friends. He went instead because he knew it was important. Although he disagreed with most of what his parents did and had trouble coming to grips with their attitude toward him, they had been able to convince him of the importance of education. His father had started out to become a chemical engineer and had completed almost a year of college before something happened. Trent couldn't help thinking that his father probably knew more than the foremen at the refinery where he worked, but he realized that his father would probably never say anything about it to a foreman or anyone else. In fact the closest the old man ever came to imposing his thoughts on anyone was in his exhortations to Trent to get a good education.

Trent realized he was a home-body—he did not particularly want to get out of the North Pass Marsh area, and he knew that

he would probably have trouble getting used to anywhere else. And despite his love of the area, what he most wanted was to have a life different from that of his parents, his relatives, and others around them. He suspected that his father probably felt the same way, but the closest he could ever come to saying it was in advising his son to see to his education.

Thoughts about his parents and his own life coursed through Trent's mind for what seemed like a very long time, and he began to get uncomfortable. Sitting in a little aluminum boat at night, floating in the open water surrounded by marsh was not especially interesting; it was really boring in fact. Being November, there were no mosquitoes to speak of and a slight breeze kept away any that might be left over from the summer's abundant crop. The breeze made it a bit chilly, however, and he became increasingly uncomfortable as the minutes passed. The boat seat was getting harder, and there was no practical way to stretch out and rest, let alone distribute his weight off the buttocks that throbbed more deeply with each passing minute.

Time went by slowly and his discomfort grew less and less bearable. Trent began to reconsider his plans to stay out all night. He wore no watch and had no idea how long he had been out. He did know that it would not be getting any warmer until the sun came up. Perhaps his parents had already returned and noticed him missing, he thought. Maybe right now they were thinking of him, beginning to worry about him, and then realizing that he could probably take care of himself.

The encouraging thought that he might be able to get his message across without enduring much more time sitting in the boat played on his mind, and when his lonely stay on the marsh at last became completely unbearable, he began slowly and painfully to paddle back toward the dock.

Traveling perhaps a half-mile, he alternately passed extensive stands of marsh grass, and brief areas of high ground, where live oaks festooned with Spanish moss along the bank gave an eerie cast to the moonlight. Coming around one bend in the channel, he thought he heard voices and then muffled thuds and vaguely metallic sounds. Then they were gone, but a few seconds later

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were back again. He paddled silently, moving forward slowly as the voices became more distinct. Sometimes the rubbing of his paddle against the side of the boat made a dull sound, but he was fairly confident that the noise would not carry to the place now drawing his attention. Inching closer, he heard the purring of an engine of some kind, the flat sounds of heavy objects jarring against one another, and the muttering of voices.

Something bumped against the bottom of the boat and gave Trent a start. He realized then that the unlikely event of hearing voices on the marsh had put him on edge, and he quickly released the tension by thinking that the collision had been with a turtle, or more likely with a submerged piece of driftwood.

He drew closer to the source of the sounds. Through a thin layer of fog he gradually began to make out the silhouette of a truck backed up to the edge of the marsh and in the moving beam of a flashlight saw two or maybe three men looking at a large object dangling over the marsh; it seemed to be an old refrigerator suspended from a short crane in the back of the truck. He could not see it clearly, nor could he make out the identity of the people from their images or voices. But he had little question about who was there and what they were up to.

Along with almost everybody else in town, Trent knew that his Uncle Harvey had a so-called trucking business—so-called because he seldom seemed to be driving anywhere. Although he was almost never out on the road hauling things around, he appeared to do quite well financially. In fact, his business had only one road-worthy vehicle, a beat up stake truck with a small crane attached. He also had an ancient “line truck.” This second vehicle looked like it was used decades ago to set telephone poles, and didn’t even have license tags; it was used only on the dirt roads around the edge of the marsh. Trent had overheard his father remark that when the line truck rarely was taken on the paved roads, it was only at times when there were unlikely to be nosy or unfriendly lawmen about.

Trent knew, and he believed that almost everyone in Sandpine Key knew that Harvey Boling’s real business had to do with hazardous waste. According to the stories circulated

locally, Harvey provided various enterprises with the valuable service of making toxic wastes disappear at a fraction of the cost demanded by legitimate disposal firms. Even though his clients must have gotten a good deal by using the shortcut offered by Harvey, there seemingly was lots of money in it because Harvey did not have to work very hard to make a living. A symbol of his prosperity was another truck that had nothing to do with the business—a brand new F-350 pickup with dual wheels that Trent’s father said was nothing more than an overpowered, overpriced family car.

As he entered a channel that would take him far away from the activity just witnessed and continued to paddle toward home, Trent concluded that this night in the marsh he was seeing his uncle at work. He had heard that few people other than Harvey knew the location of deep holes in the marsh able to swallow up waste-laden oil drums. Moreover, no one else knew of the few places where one could drive a truck right up to the edge of one of those holes and discharge heavy cargo.

Trent returned to the house to find his father already there. To his surprise, it was just after ten o’clock and not far later, as he had been led to believe when out on the marsh. His father was using a small brush to clean the mechanism of a broken clock that had sat unused on a shelf for years. The realization came upon Trent that his father was not aware that he had been gone, and the intended message of his carefully orchestrated sojourn on the marsh had not been delivered to this parent.

“Where’s Mom?” Trent said. She and his father were always together, whether at the tavern or at home in the evenings.

“Oh, she is with Michelle,” his father said. He looked up from the metal parts spread out on a newspaper. “Michelle tripped on the landing this afternoon and bruised up her face pretty good when she fell down the stairs.”

Just as people in town likely knew about Harvey Boling’s real business, it was probably also common local knowledge that Harvey, and not a flight of stairs or some other household accident, was responsible for Michelle’s frequent bruises and

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fractures. His mother's sister got knocked around frequently by her husband, and hushed voices worried that the escalating violence would result in permanent injury or worse.

Trent said good night and went to bed, dejected at his failure to show his parents how independent and grown up he had become. His mother was often preoccupied with Michelle's marital problems, and he realized that even if his plans had been successful she would have been in no frame of mind to receive such subtle messages from her son.

Getting through to his father seemed hopeless at times—most times, in fact. He never seemed to notice the problems in his own life, let alone in the lives of those around him. A quiet, passive man, he appeared content with a life outside working hours at the refinery that consisted of little more than drinking beer, fishing in the tidal creeks, or fiddling with boats and motors. While his father had never talked about it, Trent sensed that his father had little use for his brother-in-law Harvey and barely tolerated his company. Yet tolerate him he did, spending more time with him than anyone outside his immediate family. People often told Trent that his father was a fine man, but the son was tacitly aware that something, sometime had led him to expect very little of life.

Trent drifted off to sleep wondering about what Harvey and his helpers had put into the marsh. Was it something so bad that someday it would rise up, kill the fish, ruin the marsh, or even poison everyone in Sandpine Key? No answers popped into his mind, and thus no churning points and counterpoints surfaced to ward off the onset of slumber.

2.

Washington, DC

Bert Charles walked up the concrete stairs and found himself on the windswept platform of the New Carrollton Station. This was one Maryland terminus of the District of Columbia Metropolitan Transit System—“The Metro”—that takes commuters from the eastern suburbs to downtown Washington.

Something about this platform works like a wind tunnel, thought Bert, probably for the fiftieth time over the past decade. The wind was icy, and despite wearing a trench coat over his thick, trusty Harris Tweed sport coat, Bert felt chilled to the bone. Some days an empty train would be sitting at the platform when he arrived and it was warmer when one waited inside the cars. Today there was no train waiting for him, and he needed to stand in the biting cold of the open platform, huddled against a concrete wall.

Long minutes later, the train finally arrived, as did a few other passengers. They would almost certainly pick up many more riders at other stops making it likely there would be standing room only by the time they reached the city center. But as the train got underway, the few passengers swayed, each in his own seat in a nearly empty car.

Bert gazed out the foggy windows as the train first cleared the inner suburbs, then outer fringes of the city with their railroad yards and several industrial sites. Crossing the trash-choked Anacostia River, the train then traversed the acres of parking lots surrounding the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium. Once almost a revered monument when it was home to the Washington Redskins football team, the stadium was now mostly disused and forlorn. Although its exterior was essentially unchanged, it seemed to look different now that it was abandoned and its onetime centrality in the life of the city was all but forgotten. Only the east side of the stadium was visible, because before

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passing the rotund structure the train began descending a long ramp that brought it underground, where it would stay for the remainder of its journey.

With nothing but the wall of the tunnel to gaze at through the windows, Bert turned his attention to his fellow riders, whose numbers had increased three- or four-fold at stops along the way. Some were dozing, some reading newspapers, some had novels, and as always, one had his eyes affixed on what appeared to be a Bible or perhaps a Quran. Most passengers, however, joined Bert in a state of suspended animation—a kind of stupor that one of Bert’s friends called the transit mode. Expressionless and zombie-like they would not return to fully conscious life until reaching their destinations.

It amused him that visitors to Washington, and particularly young children, found the Metrorail a fascinating and even exciting experience. When asked what they liked about Washington, many were likely to say, “Oh, the Metro system is really nice.” Not so the daily riders, who regarded it variously as an extension of their working hours, an undesired but nevertheless helpful transition from work to home, or a tragic investment and wanton waste of precious hours. A colleague of Bert’s once commented that by his calculations, a person spending an entire career in Washington and commuting by Metro might devote fully two years sitting in those swaying cars. Bert did not want to check his friend’s calculations or even think about that subject. He gazed one more time at his fellow passengers and convinced himself that smiling faces are scarce in Metro cars. The thought occurred to him that if he did see a smiling face, he would be forced to conclude that it belonged to a deranged person.

His mind wandering, Bert thought of a well-reported episode in which the first President Bush—George H.W. Bush—committed a gaffe. He was less prone to verbal and other mistakes than his son, George the younger, so his missteps tended to be widely reported. In one episode, he had unwittingly revealed his distance from the government workers all around him in Washington. He referred to them as “my strap-hangers,” most likely based on images from the movies of riders clinging

to overhead straps in subway cars. Had Bush acquired any first-hand knowledge about the Washington, DC Metro system, he would surely have known that there are no straps for commuters to hang onto. In crowded subway cars, riders mostly sat or held onto overhead rails. That reminded Bert of another story. Visiting a trade show, the elder George had expressed his amazement at the modern miracle of the bar-code reader he had seen in a working supermarket display. In doing so, he had betrayed the sheltered, privileged life he enjoyed; department stores had been using barcodes for a decade.

Arriving at the Farragut West station, Bert's mind reengaged with the present. He took the escalator up to street level and was immediately buoyed by emerging into a sunny, though still breezy day. It had been quite dark and overcast when the train left the New Carrollton station. Especially in the darker parts of the year, one never really knew what kind of day one was facing until emerging from the dark tunnel at the end of his Metro ride.

Once above ground, Bert was in the habit of taking a variety of routes from the Farragut West station to the Fish and Wildlife office in the Barnhardt Building. Never wandering more than a few blocks from the shortest route, he got to view all kinds of sights. These short side trips seldom failed to entertain and energize him. Everywhere workers—most seemingly Mexicans, Salvadorans, or other Third-World immigrants—were sweeping or hosing off the tile and cobblestone walks in front of classy buildings with up-scale boutiques or hole-in-the-wall shops manned by Koreans who sell magazines, cigarettes, bottled water, or carry-out lunches prepared for the onslaught of office workers. Other people would be unloading newspapers and filling vending machines, while shop owners unfurled canvas awnings, and street hawkers offering umbrellas, t-shirts, and neckties set up their portable businesses. Taxi drivers would be sitting in their cabs waiting for fares, or standing outside chatting with one another. There were always at least one or two homeless people—hobos—along his route, although their numbers ebbed and swelled, seemingly based on the variable locations at which mobile soup kitchens were stationed. Some homeless people were said to be aggressive and threatening,

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but Bert rarely encountered any who paid him any attention at all. This must have been a normal day, because only two were seen, both sprawled out on park benches, probably enjoying the warming rays of the early morning sun.

Showing various signs of middle age including the slight bulge beginning to develop at his midriff, Bert had thought of joining a gym. His commuter's schedule made it difficult, however, and for now he comforted himself with the thought that walks such as this one were a helpful, if barely adequate form of exercise. Weather permitting, he would take a longer walk at lunchtime, after having a sandwich at his desk.

Still walking and a few yards away from the Barnhardt Building, Bert fumbled in his briefcase and retrieved his name tag, without which he would be denied entry to the building. It bore his full name in large, easily legible letters, together with a decent, though not flattering, mug shot and a holographic insert to deter counterfeiters. Images and ideas in his mind seemed to revisit and repeat themselves over and over in the sameness of his workday routine, and once again it struck Bert that absent this required identification badge, hardly anybody would know that his given name was Hubert. In school some of his classmates had insisted on calling him "Hubie." This he took in good humor, but was disgusted one summer when visitors from New York—"The City" as they called it—insisted on calling him "Youbee," stretching out the syllables in a way that clearly conveyed ridicule. From that point on, he had done his best to ensure that people understood that he wished to be addressed as Bert.

After showing his badge to the guard, grunting something that might have been interpreted as a greeting, and entering the elevator, he emerged on the fifth floor. He walked by a poster advertising an upcoming blood drive, another announcing the long-past annual celebration of Migratory Bird Day, and others describing what procedures to follow if one believed he or she was a victim of discrimination.

On the way to his office, he was met by Doug Murphy.

“You may think you like today’s weather,” Murphy said, while affecting a wry smile, “but wait until this afternoon when the cold front comes through.”

Doug had worked his entire career in the Washington Office, knew at least someone in every Department, and prided himself on being a reliable source of information. Aside from his assigned job, he had taken on responsibility for ensuring that rumors originating on the third floor made their way to the seventh floor, the sixth floor, and so forth. One of those rare people who expect their jobs to be a constant source of fun and are delighted with every small pleasure it provides, he was seldom discouraged or depressed. Indeed, one of Doug’s daily pleasures was checking the weather forecasts on the Internet as soon as he arrived each morning and informing any and all who would listen of their content.

Bert usually had a weather-related reply to Doug’s predictable early-morning forecast, and this relieved him of the responsibility to engage in a thoughtful conversation while his mind was still recovering from the morning commute. Today however, Doug did not linger for a response.

Bert entered his tiny office, dodging a stack of papers on the floor beside his metal desk and stepping over another. He thought about Doug and how his career had turned out so different from his own. Doug loved working in the Washington Office and probably could not imagine having any other job. But Bert, coming from a small town in the north woods, had always liked the outdoors, was fascinated with biology, and as a youth had avidly devoured *Conservationist* magazines. His career aspirations had never strayed too far, and he had jumped through the educational and other hoops to become a wildlife scientist. He had even practiced as a wildlife scientist for a few short years, but one thing led to another and he now found himself deep inside the guts of one of the world’s premier bureaucracies.

His father, an insurance investigator and thus a bureaucrat of sorts, had wanted Bert to become a lawyer. His mother wanted

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him to become a dentist. She had been a full-time housewife, although she had business school training and had once been encouraged to apply for an administrative job at a paper mill. Somehow he had managed to meet the expectations of neither parent, and instead followed what he thought to be a true calling. Obviously there was no turning back, but he nevertheless often wondered how his life might have been different if he had followed the counsel of either of them.

He reflected that the course his career had followed was all too common, if one were to believe stories of others who had experienced similar fates. His hope, no doubt naïve, had been to unlock the mysteries of the wildlife of his native Adirondacks. He loved wildlife science, and had been good at it precisely because he loved what he was doing. But other jobs needed to be done, and promotions and greater responsibility were offered. Almost before he knew what was happening, he found himself in a succession of jobs he could do competently, but which offered little personal satisfaction.

Was he any longer a wildlife scientist in any reasonable sense of the word? Bert would have had trouble making that case, and every indicator he could imagine suggested that he was a full-blown, full-time paper pusher. Many of his colleagues in the office had similar stories, and some held forth hopes of sometime returning to “the field.” Even those with the fondest hopes, however, realized that chances overwhelmingly favored the prospect that they would finish their careers in this very building.

Bert was calmly resigned to continuing on a career path he did not actively seek or expect, stationed here in the agency’s headquarters. Nevertheless, he was occasionally and unexpectedly overcome with panic when the realization came to him that in 15 years, more or less, he would have reached retirement age. What would he do then? With no close family, few friends outside of work, and no serious hobbies or other preoccupations, those unwelcome moments in which he found himself contemplating retirement were unsettling. It was like staring into an abyss.

His reverie was interrupted by someone at his office door. It was Doug again.

“I forgot to tell you, Helen was trying to reach you yesterday when you were out, she called several times and no one seemed to know where you were, it sounded to me like she had something urgent.” His message delivered, Doug added, “Anyhow, I believe that Julie took a message.”

Bert found the message slip with its scrawled information in his in-box and called the number Julie had written down. After eight rings and no answer, he gave up and turned his attention to the other items in the in-box. He knew that Doug’s idea of urgent usually had to do with passing on the latest rumor, and he was confident that Helen would reach him if there were a real need.

One thick bundle waiting for him was unwelcome, though not unexpected. It was a sheaf of paper, perhaps ¾-inch thick sandwiched between two yellow cardboard covers—the kind of stiff binders once used for computer print-outs. Taped to the front of this package was a single sheet of paper with 12 lines, each with a typed name and space for recording dates printed underneath. The lines were signature lines, to record the progress of the binder and its contents. Something between a document and a file, this was known in the office as a “listing package.”

This well-worn bundle was the proposal to add the salt marsh slider to the endangered species list. The proposal needed to go through a long series of reviews, revisions, approvals, and legal evaluations before moving further in the process that would ultimately result in the slider—surely one of the world’s rarest turtles—being given formal protection under the Endangered Species Act. Only when the signatures of all the appropriate officials named on the cover sheet were affixed could Bert begin to feel that his efforts were bearing fruit. In this case, instead of signing the package and sending it forward to the next office, one of the reviewers had raised a question or concern and had returned the document for another change.

Curious about what the problem could be this time, Bert thumbed through the file, looking for a tell-tale sticky-note or a scrawl on one of the pages. Some of the people expected to sign off on the document had little knowledge of any of the issues involved, or even of the fine points of the lengthy process needed to do this right. These uninformed or lazy reviewers were harder to deal with than those persons having legitimate concerns; some of the less-informed reviewers felt constrained to comment, regardless of how trivial their concerns might be—apparently to prove in the face of all contrary evidence that they were contributing to the effort.

Seeing no shortcuts and wondering what obstacle had resulted in this latest ricochet, he began to read. Somewhere he would find a question mark or tiny annotation that told him why this was again back on his desk,