

The Kalamazoo  
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I didn't know the river then. And what I did know, I didn't much like. I was a lonely, singular child of twelve or so. My Mom had just packed me and a few belongings into our old Ford Galaxie 500 and lit out with a squeal of tires from the cramped, ramshackle of a house we had shared with my father. We both feared him. She, because of the beatings he regularly gave her, with care taken to land body blows and back-of-the-head slaps that wouldn't betray his actions to the neighbors. With me, most of the violence was with words -- insulting, demeaning, calling me a sissy, candy ass, fairy, altogether unworthy of his good name. He punctuated these with a back-of-the-hand slap just often enough to make my terror even greater when he stalked off without landing a blow. At least when his hand arced me backwards into the grass, I knew what to expect as the wave of pain waxed and waned as I lay there.

Given the magnitude of our escape and the changes it unleashed, I wasted those first few hours of new freedom. All I could do was cry as Dry Creek, Kentucky receded. Interstate 75 was our freedom trail leading north, the Brent Spence bridge at Cincinnati carrying us high above the former shallows of the Ohio River, which fugitive slaves once waded guided by the stars. And crying for what? For the Game Boy that, in our rush, I had left behind. Silly, a plastic game box, little bigger than a deck of cards into which I poured my loneliness. It was not like the thing worked anyway. My father had long refused to buy batteries for it -- another species of his cruelty towards me. So what I played with was the memory of Game Boy games, fingering the keys and imagining the little man bouncing across the tiny screen bound for adventure. My tears were more for the loss of that imagined world than the real electronic one. But I was soon to encounter an entirely new world beyond imagining.

I must have fallen asleep at some point in that six-hour drive, because before I knew it we were there, Comstock, Michigan. I remember opening my eyes to the sight of maple trees in full fall colors, glorious yellows and reds, which I would later learn marked two variants of the species. Our destination was Morrow Nook, a trailer park that contained our new residence -- a twelve by thirty-two foot riveted metal box where my grandfather had lived and died just two years before. Trailer parks are easy to find -- wrong side of the tracks, on a flood plain, on land no one wants -- Morrow Nook was all of these. It was also sort of a family compound for my Mom, with aunts, uncles, cousins of varied affinity, some of whose relation to us I never managed to figure out. There may have been a dozen trailers arranged in a large semi-circle at a bend in the Kalamazoo river. It was all a bit Brigadoonish, these metal monstrosities seemingly swept in by a flood, awaiting the next flood to disperse them once again. The maples I saw were second or third growth survivors of long-ago logging, and their leaves were scattered across the

path leading to our trailer, as we stiffly made our way to grandpa's house. Strange, I had never known him. Mom was banished from the family when she ran off to marry my father. She hadn't grown up in Comstock, but further downriver in Kalamazoo where her father worked at the old Mead Paper plant there.

Someone had attempted to clean our trailer somewhat, as stacks of old newspapers lined the walk leading to the entrance. Four rickety wooden steps led us to the door, which was partially open as if to allow a sigh to escape from inside. And we, too, sighed when we switched on the light and took in the sight and smell. Especially the smell! A mingling of decay and mouse shit created a miasma that gagged us at first until we located and cleared the mouse nests, pried the windows open, and began what became a two-day cleanup effort. Mom and I worked side-by-side and it felt good to wield a scrub brush and tote bucket after bucket of dirty water outside as we rendered the interior livable. There were enough dishes, a table, chairs and a couple of beds in the back. Grandpa had been a reader so the walls were lined with an eccentric array of books some of them issued from book-of-the-month clubs, so many classics loomed over me just out of reach as I lay in my bed.

On the third day we rested. Mom sent me down to the nearby store about a mile off in what passed for downtown Comstock, to buy packages of cereal, macaroni and cheese, peanut butter, pasta and spaghetti sauce, which were the mainstays of our diet. I looked back at her as I left, her sitting on the steps, looking after me. I didn't know it then, but that was about the last time Mom left the trailer for months and months. Later, I read about Japanese people who never left their house; they even had a special name for them -- the *Hikikomori*. I became our ambassador to the outside world, cashing the occasional checks from Dry Creek and buying provisions and the few school supplies I required. Oh, yes, that was the other thing Mom managed to do before withdrawing -- she enrolled me in Comstock Middle School.

The school was a mile walk in the opposite direction from downtown, along the busy shoulder of State Route 43. After driving me there the first morning, Mom left it up to me to navigate the distance from our trailer to school thereafter. I soon discovered trails and by ways away from the road. I very much liked the walk, which wound along the river, past inlets and wetlands alive with frogs and turtles. I confess that often my search for these creatures caused me to be late to school, which very much displeased my home room teacher, Mrs. Madison. She was a severe appearing middle-aged woman, with mid-length graying hair that gave her an owlish look, and always wore loafers that squeaked when she walked. We gathered in her classroom every morning, those unfortunate enough to be in her part of the alphabet, and endured a rather dour period of announcements and general inattention. It was there I encountered Junior.

To this day I have no idea what his real name was, for he existed as a shorter version of his father, who was our local chief of police. He was of course called Senior and he embodied human menace with a pronounced and exaggerated notion of his own power. It was a perfect job for a bully as most days he drove Comstock's single police car slowly from one end of town to the other, stopping for donuts at Dawn's and meals at

Tony's Feed and Fuel. He never paid for these, I learned, and he always made prominent display of his weapons -- especially his night stick, which he liked to twirl and even poke playfully those who stopped to talk with him. Word was that he had clubbed quite a few men to the ground with that stick, and he liked to compound the humiliation by pinning the downed man under his foot. A diet of donuts and Tony's hash and eggs made for considerable bulk and Senior was a tall man as well. When we learned the metric system I tried to reckon Senior's weight in kilos, arriving at an estimate of 125 kilos or perhaps 20 stone, since I was deeply interested in British literature at the time, priding myself on knowing that antique metric.

Junior was tall for his age, just about my height in fact, but much bulkier in his accustomed blue jeans and varieties of t-shirt and sweatshirts, many with police logos on them. He seemed to take an instant dislike to me and I tried to stay away from him. But he caught me once in the boys' bathroom a few weeks after I arrived, shoving my head against the wall as I was peeing in the urinal. Cackling and gesticulating at where I had sprayed pee over myself, he crowed, "Look what this piece of trailer trash just did..he pissed hisself." Ever after I was called TT and the name seemed to symbolize my marginality among my fellow students.

But frankly, I didn't care. I was used to being alone and with the care of my mother, exploring the river, and reading my grandfather's books, I had plenty to occupy me. Weeks and months passed as winter brought more snow than I had ever experienced in Kentucky. There was an old pair of snowshoes in one of the sheds in the middle of camp, so I took to trudging in those into the woods and along the river. It was on one of these expeditions, in February or March, I think, that I made an important discovery.

The honeysuckle grew thickly just off the banks of the Kalamazoo, so thickets of it became a common obstacle; but in winter I threaded through and around them, pushing, bending and dodging my way along paths only I knew. One day, though, with a good covering of snow, I tripped and fell over an unexpected bump in the honeysuckle, which upon inspection turned out to be the bow of a canoe. It was so thoroughly entangled in the overgrowth that I had to fetch the hatchet from our trailer park's shed to free it. After what seemed like hours of work in the snow and cold I freed my find and was able to size it up. It was black with dirt, around eight feet or so in length, and when I turned it over I could see it was a fully serviceable boat left by someone unknown, at some unknown time in the past with the full expectation to be used again. Why? By whom? And to what purpose? These were questions I could not answer; but the canoe became mine in the meantime.

Comstock and our trailer park lay in a bend of the Kalamazoo whose width was augmented by the remains of a dam built in the 1930s. This gave me and my canoe a large body of water with little in the way of current to navigate. There was also a small island some hundred yards from shore, which became the first object of my efforts after I found a paddle in our utility shed. This was a partial answer to the riddle, that the canoe's owner may have been been a distant cousin, who came and went as so many of my family did, leaving behind in trailer and shoreline relics of their passage. I

gradually became adept in launching, docking, and eventually in paddling in a relatively straight line. I pictured myself as a native warrior, intent on scouting and hunting, following animal tracks in the snow and signs of ancient visitors to my island. Or I might be a *voyageur*, with a canoe full of pelts, bound perhaps for nearby Fort Joseph, which we learned about in our history class.

I passed that spring and summer running half wild in our woods, paddling my canoe, returning to our trailer only to look after Mom, fixing her meals such as they were, and doing enough cleaning to keep the place habitable. The only part I really hated was lugging our laundry to the town's laundromat every two weeks or so. Fortunately, the kindly owner instructed me in sorting laundry and operating the machines, and also gave me his football magazines. These I read with rapt attention through wash cycles and dry cycles as I had never seen an actual game for we had no TV. I confess that abstract football joined my other obsessive reading interest, my grandfather's collection of books on Zen and Japanese martial arts. In my fervent imagination and equally fervent play the two disciplines mixed and mated, so that football became an exercise in harnessing the force of the adversary to defeat him. Thus my ideal in the game had nothing to do with passing, or punting, kicking or running, but of meting out force, or better yet, turning the power of the opponent against him.

That fall I had my opportunity to put my imaginings into practice when freshmen football began with a visit of the coach, Michael Williams, to my homeroom. I was not too bad a prospect, having shot up to near six feet in height and weighing about one fifty or so. When we turned out for practice, I was quickly delegated to defense, as most of the other boys wanted to be quarterbacks, or at least running backs or receivers. I was pleased when my size and reasonable running speed were deemed perfect for the linebacker position, and I took to it with a vengeance. I read up on the great figures who had played the position, Dick Butkus, Les Richter, Nick Buoniconti, seeking to imitate their instinct for destruction. Quite quickly I became adept at reading offenses, shedding blocks, disrupting pass patterns, and most of all delivering tackles that would be remembered by those I took to the turf. Soon the others on the defensive squad looked to me to call plays as coach Miller had little interest in defense.

And at last my virtuosity in defense gave me my chance at revenge. On Tuesdays we usually had an intra-squad scrimmage at the end of practice, with us on defense imitating the defensive "looks" of that week's opponent. I took a deep breath of the turf smells, so like those of the freshly plowed fields of Spring as we lined up. My gaze was fixed on Junior, who usually replaced the first-team fullback when a pass play was coming. I studied him for a moment, noted the slack chin strap on his helmet, and general inattention so typical of him. Coach was under some pressure from Senior that his son receive playing time, so he played far more than his meagre skill would ordinarily allow. In our defensive huddle I called a linebacker stunt in which I would shoot the gap between guard and tackle in pursuit of the quarterback, while my two fellow linebackers fell back to cover potential receivers. I knew our linemen were big and slow, which should permit me to rapidly penetrate into the backfield and encounter Junior before he could see me coming.

The center snapped the ball, and, as I suspected it was a pass play with our quarterback dropping back and Junior stepping forward to block. I shot through the gap heading straight for him, counting on surprise and my plan to bring him down. I knew with my speed and relative strength delivered straight to his chest would likely topple him over backwards and a little finesse would do the rest. His eyes widened in surprise when I hit him face mask to face mask and knocked him backward. He struck the ground with my weight full on him and the force of the blow to the back of his head knocked him out as I could see his eyes roll back. His loose chin strap allowed me to force his helmet back as he fell and with a shoulder pad I was able to deliver a crushing blow to the bridge of his nose. He probably would not remember the hit, but his face would always bear the mark of its impact.

I got up from the play and immediately stalked off toward the locker room. Coach at first started to yell at me before noticing the motionless figure of Junior on the ground. He panicked and started yelling for an ambulance, forgetting entirely about me as I made my way off the field. I knew I had at most two hours, while the ambulance took Junior to Bronson hospital and his father saw him there, before Senior would come looking for me. I threw off my equipment in no particular order, knowing I would never use it again, before setting off for home along the bike path that was effectively screened from the road. I had planned for this moment so I took my time, enjoying the leaves in full autumnal color and the promise of frost overnight.

Twenty minutes later I reached our trailer and switched into my escape plan. I had stowed two canoe-ready packages underneath the trailer -- one containing dehydrated food and the second clothes, a sleeping roll and a mini-stove, flashlight, and other camping items. I quickly slung these over my shoulder and followed the familiar path down to the river. My canoe was concealed in the bushes a short distance from water's edge. I left the cargo near the water and dragged the boat towards the Kalamazoo. Wasting no time, I loaded my freight, checked to make sure it was balanced properly below the water line. I launched the sleek aluminum craft, jumped in and took my paddle and began to join the feeble current in the downstream sweep of the river. It was twilight as I began my rhythmic chant:

Dip, dip, dip and pull,  
Dip, dip, dip and pull  
First on the right,  
then on the left,  
Dip, dip, dip and pull.

Twilight deepened as I hit mid-river; the water and heavens merged in luminescence as if welcoming me to their watery world.

Dip, dip, dip and pull.  
Dip, dip, dip and pull.  
First on the right,

then on the left.

Just ahead lay the city of Kalamazoo and the empty hulk of the paper mill where my grandfather had labored, its lights twinkled a welcome as I gathered speed. The stars emerged as if awaiting my arrival, and my life, my very being, seemed liquid, merging, merging into a path to freedom. Just beyond lay Parchment and its abandoned paper mills, then Allegan, Saugatuck and then far off Lake Michigan.

Dip, dip, dip and pull,  
Dip, dip, dip and pull.  
First on the right,  
then on the left.

I didn't know the river then. I know the river now.