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BRADLEY COOK

My Mother's Party

When I was a boy I lived with my Uncle Lloyd and his wife, Aimee. Their house sat up on stilts in case the river should flood. It slid past our place with only the narrow highway and about two feet of bank separating our property line from the river's muddy depths. I remember once the water spilled up over the highway and covered the lawn. Aimee worried that one of the stilts would sink into the mud and the house would shift and come apart at its seams. I thought for sure that the water would rise all the way above the roof and we would be swallowed up. That night I dreamt of us underwater, catfish darting in and out of our rooms, the three of us drifted weightless, our hair fanning like dye in the current.

From my bedroom window I watched the river pushing south at night when I couldn't sleep, and on the nights when the moon was big in the sky, it glittered the water's surface and looked like a million nickels bouncing along its ripples. I pressed myself against the pane of glass and felt the coolness of it against my face. When there was no moon, I could still make out the black shape of the river and I closed my eyes and listened to it washing against itself and waited for the water to speak to me.

There were nights that Lloyd would take me across the highway and we would stand together on the short bank and skim pebbles out over the surface. Sometimes one of our pebbles would disappear into the darkness before falling into the water and I imagined it skipping along the surface forever, or maybe rising up high into the air and vanishing among the blanket of stars draped over our heads. I remember Aimee sitting at the foot of my bed some mornings when I woke, how she smiled at me, and I wondered how long she had been watching me dream; I remember that I didn't usually notice the sound of the river when I woke up, though it was so noisy when I had gone to sleep the night before, the house always filled with other sounds in the morning: Lloyd and his brother talking from the kitchen table about the work they had to get done that day, the bubbling and hissing of coffee brewing in the percolator, Aimee's breakfast of sow belly with potatoes and peppers frying

in her black cast-iron skillet on the stove, the hum of cars moving up and down the highway. I remember the way Aimee leaned her hip into the kitchen counter drinking her coffee with one hand, the other tucked into the pocket of her grease-spattered and snug apron as she watched us eat. After breakfast she would wipe her wire-rimmed bifocals with a red handkerchief, a single thread of smoke unspooling out of the ashtray behind her.

Alton in those days was just another river town. Barges and steamships and ferries pushed up and down, stopping sometimes down at the locks. Earlier in the century Alton had been a major port city, but those days were long past when I was growing up. There were no longer docks or wharves. I remember some old pilings behind the flour mill that were the remnants of a previous wharf, but that was as close as it ever got for me. By my time, Alton was no longer a successful port. Residents had to rely on the steel mill and the glass works and the box board. We were an industry town. It seemed like everyone I knew worked or had a parent who worked in one of the factories.

There was still plenty of activity along the river that I could watch from our front yard or from my bedroom window. During the day barges moved up and down in schools of ten or more pushed by tow-boats. They could have been carrying anything. I often imagined that they were taking away the wheat and grain that Lloyd and his brother harvested. There was a limestone quarry to the east of us and great stone blocks were hauled away right before me. In summertime there were excursion boats which came up from St. Louis. My favorite was the *Moonlight Cruise*, a steam-operated paddle boat that washed out of the darkness and cut the dank July air with the sound of drunken laughter and coins spilling from slot machines. From where I stood booze sounded like fun aboard the *Moonlight Cruise*.

My parents split up when I was young, maybe five or six, and I bounced back and forth between each of their homes. I'd stay with my father for a while, until he got sick of me being around, and then he would convince my mother that I needed to go stay with her. By the time she had gotten tired of me interrupting her own social life, my father had gotten used to living by himself. Lloyd and Aimee always wanted kids of their own, but Aimee was never able to carry a child to full term. They had parented six miscarriages before they

accepted it wasn't in God's plan for them. When my mother asked Lloyd and Aimee if they would mind me staying with them, they nearly insisted. I was just glad to be in a house with people who wanted me there.

Everyone knew my father as Bum. He never remarried after he split with my mother. My mother's first marriage was to a man everyone knew as Bull. Bum and Bull, my mother's two loves. My father's forearms were taut, ropey muscles you could see through the skin. He had a barrel chest and knobby square fists. When he told you something, it was easy to believe what he said.

Bum had an old mare that he would bring into his house. He owned a small one-bedroom on the riverfront, and his mare took up nearly the entire living room when she was inside. He fed her cans of beer, and she would nicker and nudge the refrigerator with her nose when she was thirsty. He had been a machine-gunner on the deck of the *USS South Dakota* during The Great War. My clearest memory of my father was watching *Victory at Sea*, a documentary that captured many of the sea battles my father had fought in. He told me stories of firing his gun at the enemy, his feet sunk in the blood of the other sailors on deck. Pretty hard to keep your feet planted to the ground in a mess like that. He sometimes would recognize men he knew in the footage, some who made it back, some who did not. I watched his face, bathed in the soft blue light of the television, and it took me a long time before I understood why he never spoke during the show and his expression never changed.

After Lloyd and his brother went off to work the fields, Aimee and I would play rummy or pinochle at the kitchen table. Then she would give me a list of chores I had to do before I could go outside to play. I would rush the trash outside, slop my blankets across my bed, fling any toys I had on the floor into the toy box Lloyd made for me, and then I would get the okay to go out. From the front porch I could watch the barges slog upstream chugging gray smoke into the air. When one of the steamships came by I would run to the edge of the highway and wave my hand madly until my arm nearly came off at the shoulder. Sometimes the skipper would see me and toot his whistle for me, and that was all I ever wanted. I would wave and wave until the ship wrapped around the bend and drifted from sight.

Sometimes Aimee would let me take my bicycle up the road from our house to see the Piasa Bird. The legend of the Piasa comes

from an old Illini story about a giant bird that carried men off in its talons to a cave to be devoured. The Piasa had antlers like a deer, the scales of a lizard, and a tail that wrapped all the way around its body. Several hundred years ago the Illini painted a picture of the legendary bird against the face of the bluffs along the river. I would go there and imagine a bird so large that it blacked out the sun, swooping down to snatch men from their plows. There were caves along the bluffs beneath the image of the bird, and I often wondered what lay within them, if there were piles of bones picked clean and shining white, or if the Piasa himself were there, nesting. I never had the courage to go in, but once I climbed up a small ridge and walked up to the mouth of one of the caves and looked inside, but just as my eyes hit the blackness, I pictured a giant beak opened wide and letting out a shriek so loud and shrill that it knocked me backwards off my feet. I got so frightened of what I might actually see that I turned and ran before I saw anything at all.

I was always proud that my father had fought for his country. The older I got the more his service meant. When I turned nineteen a lot of my friends were getting drafted to go fight in the war in Southeast Asia. I never saw myself as fit for the army, all that walking and handing out food rations, so I followed my father's footsteps and enlisted in the U.S. Navy. It was never made clear to me how much of the fighting was being done over there by sailors, but I imagined there had to be plenty. It was my time to serve, and I wanted to serve exactly as my father had done before me. I didn't make it overseas one time during the entire conflict. I was stationed as a medic in China Lake, California. I changed bandages on Marines missing limbs, tried to calm down eighteen-year-old boys when they woke from dreams, the horrors of which I could not imagine, nor did I want to. I was in the barracks one evening after mail call. I never received a lot of mail, but I had a letter from my mother, and it took me a long time to build the courage to open it. When I did I was so surprised by the first line that I read it over and over and did not notice the petty officer who had entered the room. Because I did not jump to attention, but stared at the only words my mother had ever written to me, the petty officer grabbed the letter from my hands and without any hesitation I punched him in the face. He went out like a bad Christmas bulb, and I went off

to the brig. I received a dishonorable discharge and went back home to Alton. I never finished reading her letter.

I was joined back in Alton by a young woman I had met in China Lake. Her name was Colleen and she was from North Dakota. She bragged to me on our first date that her daddy was a cowboy. I didn't tell her anything at all about my folks. We got married, and I took a job at the gunpowder plant. When my twelve-hour shift was over I drove up the old highway, following the bends and crooks cut by the river to Lloyd and Aimee's house where we lived just as I had when I was a boy. One night after I got home the four of us sat at the kitchen table playing rummy and drinking coffee. Colleen was about four months pregnant with our first child, and she and Aimee both shined like the early sun with the prospect of new life. We all sat studying our hands, and when it was Lloyd's turn to draw and he didn't, Aimee said to him, "Come on, you old coot, draw a card." We looked at him and it seemed to me that he'd just fallen asleep. His cigarette still burned in the ashtray in front of him. Somehow I remember hearing him let out three tiny puffs of air and his breath made the smoke rising off his cigarette seem to dance, and I knew those breaths were his last. An ambulance came to our house, and I followed behind as it raced to the hospital. I tried to look at how the red flashing lights bounced off the water, but I couldn't see them.

Some nights I dream that I am a catfish, swinging my wide head from side to side as I churn through a river stained red. Sometimes I swim into Lloyd and Aimee's house through an open window and they are sitting at the kitchen table and Lloyd tries again and again to strike his Zippo. Other times I see the Piasa swoop out of the sky and carry the ambulance and Lloyd away into a black sky. But what wakes me most, the one that keeps me from falling back asleep, is this:

Uncle Lloyd was the biggest Brooklyn Dodgers fan in the county, which made me the second. Most everyone cheered for the Cardinals just down the river in St. Louis. Every time the Dodgers were in town to play the Cards, Lloyd made sure he had two tickets to the game. He would wake up extra early to get a jump on work, or he would work well past dark so that we never missed a single inning. I sat across the bench seat of his Ford pickup as we drove to the city, smacking my mitt, picturing a foul ball from Duke Snyder or Jackie Robinson landing inside the pocket. We always sat behind the Dodgers' dugout, and when the players ran on or off the field,

they were so close I could nearly reach my hand out and touch them. You could hear Don Newcombe grunt when he'd rear back and unfurl a fastball. Sitting there in the stands of Sportsman's Park watching the Dodgers with Lloyd, I think I was as happy as any kid ought to be.

One afternoon after the game Lloyd walked me out to the right-field bleachers where some of the Dodgers' players were signing autographs. One of the players was my childhood hero, Roy Campanella. I stood in line to meet him for what felt like hours in the muggy July sun. When I finally got to the front of the line, Roy Campanella asked me what my name was. I was frozen, the first and maybe only time I was ever starstruck. I just stared at the way his wool uniform stretched around his shoulders, and how thick his jaw and cheeks appeared, tiny pearls of sweat sliding down his face. He looked up at Lloyd and the two of them chuckled to each other. When I asked him if they were going to beat the Yankees this year, he winked and smiled and said, "I hope so, son." Then he handed me back my baseball with his name scrawled between the seams. I can't remember a time that I was more overcome with joy as I was that entire ride home. I kept looking at that ball, kept showing it to Lloyd, kept asking him if he thought this would be the year that the Dodgers finally won the Series. I smiled so big and so long that my cheeks hurt.

Once in a while when I was staying with Lloyd and Aimee, my mother would get a sudden change of heart and want me to come back and live with her. This was during one of those times, and Lloyd pulled up to my mother's house, and I got out with my glove and my baseball and headed up to the front porch. Just as I was opening the screen door, I heard the sound of glass breaking from inside the house. I spun around to run back to Lloyd, but he was already driving away and had turned the corner. I worried that my mother and her new boyfriend were fighting, feared that he might be hurting her, yet still I could not open the door. All seemed quiet then, and I crept around to the back and peeked inside through the window.

My mother sat on the kitchen floor, porcelain chips sprinkled across the hardwood. Her back was pressed against the wall but her bottom was out further so that she was sitting crooked and her posture forced her chin against her chest. The hem of her dress was up

over her knees and I could see the dark tops of her stockings which made me feel ashamed. She looked like she was weeping and, never having seen my mother cry, I wondered if she fell and hurt herself. I pushed the door open slowly and stepped inside. She turned her head my direction as though she didn't recognize me. Then she began to giggle. She raised a glass filled with ice and something clear that I know now wasn't water and tilted it like I'd seen people do in the movies, then she took a long drink with her eyes closed.

The winter before, an ice storm had crippled Alton. The town sparkled like a great jewel and clean icicles toothed tree limbs and eaves, and the streets were glazed with a sheen of ice. Cars slid into each other or into ditches on the side of the highway. I had been looking at the frozen neighborhood one Sunday morning through the latticework of ice on my bedroom window from the second floor of my mother's house. Our neighbor, the widow Mrs. White, was going down her walk to her car parked on the street to drive to church. She took careful, choppy steps, but she slipped and landed hard on her back. I didn't know why, but I cried. The longer she lay there on the cold ground, not moving, the harder I cried for her. I say this now, because looking at my mother on our kitchen floor reminded me of Mrs. White, how nobody came to help her back to her feet. I could have gotten help for Mrs. White, but I didn't. I didn't offer my mother any help.

When she spoke her voice was gruff and she told me to bring her the china bowl that was on the counter. I hesitated and she barked for me to hurry up. The bowl was cream colored with a navy blue ornamentation of leaves and branches woven together, and two bluebirds whose wings intertwined were fired into the bowl's center. She took the bowl into her right hand, brought it up over her head and then smashed it into the floor, showering both of us with porcelain debris. The blow cut her hand, and she bled onto her dress. "Quick, get me another one," she said, then took down the rest of her drink. When I didn't move she threw the glass and it exploded just to my left and chipped the paint on the wall. I had ducked my head, and when I looked up she was staring at me. Not a muscle moved in her body, and her eyes were directly on me. Then I began to cry.

Sobbing, I slid over to the counter and picked up another bowl. She had put her hands beneath her and her feet flat against the floor

and was pushing herself up against the wall trying to stand. She wiped the side of her face with her cut hand, and blood smeared across her cheek. She walked over to me and gently took the bowl from my hands and sat it back on the counter. The tears came harder and I couldn't find my breath. Kneeling down in front of me, she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and patted the back of my head.

"Shush now," she said. "There ain't no need to cry. Mommy's just having a little party. Shush now." Her breath was hot and sour and tickled my nose to smell it. Our bodies rocked side to side and she kissed my forehead. I tried to stop the tears but couldn't. She squeezed me against her; the weight of our swaying nearly brought both of us to the floor. "Now," she said. "You be a good boy and clean up this mess." She left me standing there, and made herself another drink and took it into the living room where she fell asleep on the couch.

Shortly thereafter I was back with Lloyd and Aimee. Lloyd hung some shelves on my bedroom wall, and I put the baseball with Roy Campanella's signature on the top shelf. Sometimes I felt like taking it down to look at it, or play catch with one of my friends, or just hold it in my hands. One day, years later, some friends and I used it to play a game of workup, and I hit the ball where nobody could find it.

The first night I spent at Lloyd and Aimee's house after that, I lay in my bed unable to sleep. I felt as if the river's current were sucking at my legs trying to pull me away. I got out of bed and went to my window. Outside, the moon hung heavy and brilliant in the sky and opened up the night. I could see the shapes of the trees along the far bank. There was the familiar sound of the river's course that was as comforting to me then as Aimee's hand on my shoulder. When the stillness was breached by the glow of the *Moonlight Cruise* coming up from St. Louis, I waved my arm hoping to be seen until the ship slipped past the front of our house and disappeared again from sight.