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The Calm

Raymond Carver

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The Calm · *Raymond Carver*

IT WAS SATURDAY morning. The days were short and there was chill in the air. I was getting a haircut. I was in the chair and three men were sitting along the wall across from me, waiting. Two of the men I'd never seen before, but one of them I recognized though couldn't place. I kept looking at him as the barber worked on my hair. He was moving a toothpick around in his mouth. He was heavysset, about fifty years old and had short wavy hair. I tried to place him, and then I saw him in a cap and uniform, wearing a gun, little eyes watchful behind the glasses as he stood in the bank lobby. He was a guard. Of the two other men, one was considerably the older, but with a full head of curly grey hair. He was smoking. The other, though not so old, was nearly bald on top, and the hair at the sides of his head hung in dark lanks over his ears. He had on logging boots and his pants were shiny with machine oil.

The barber put a hand on top of my head to turn me for a better look. Then he said to the guard, "Did you get your deer, Charles?"

I liked this barber. We weren't acquainted well enough to call each other by name, but when I came in for a haircut he knew me and knew I used to fish, so we'd talk fishing. I don't think he hunted, but he could talk on any subject and was a good listener. In this regard he was like some bartenders I've known.

"Bill, it's a funny story. The damndest thing," the guard said. He removed the toothpick and laid it in the ashtray. He shook his head. "I did and yet I didn't. So yes and no to your question."

I didn't like his voice. For a big man the voice didn't fit. I thought of the word "wimpy" my son used to use. It was somehow feminine, the voice, and it was smug. Whatever it was it wasn't the kind of voice you'd expect, or want to listen to all day. The two other men looked at him. The older man was turning the pages of a magazine, smoking, and the other fellow was holding a newspaper. They put down what they were looking at and turned to listen.

"Go on, Charles," the barber said. "Let's hear it." He turned my head again, held the clippers a minute, then went back to work.

"We were up on Fikle Ridge, my old man and me and the kid. We were hunting those draws. My old man was stationed at the head of one draw, and me and the kid were on another. The kid had a hangover, goddamn his hide. It was in the afternoon and we'd been out since daybreak. The kid he was pale around the gills and drank water all day, mine and his both. But we were in hopes of some of the hunters down below moving a deer up in our direction. We were sitting behind a log watching the draw. We'd heard shooting down in the valley."

"There's orchards down there," said the fellow with the newspaper. He fidgeted a lot and kept crossing a leg, swinging his boot for a time, and then crossing the other leg. "Those deer hang out around those orchards."

"That's right," the guard said. "They'll go in there at night, the bastards, and eat those green apples. Well, we'd heard shooting earlier in the day, as I

said, and we were just sitting there on our hands when this big old buck comes up out of the underbrush not a hundred feet in front of us. The kid saw him the same time I did of course and threw down and started banging at him, the knothead. The old buck wasn't in any danger from the kid as it turns out, but at first he couldn't tell where the shots were coming from. He didn't know which way to jump. Then I got off a shot, but in all the commotion I just stunned him."

"Stunned him," the barber said.

"You know, stunned him," the guard said. "It was a gut shot. It just stunned him like. He dropped his head and began trembling. He trembled all over. The kid was still shooting. I felt like I was back in Korea. I shot again but missed. Then old Mr. Buck moves off into the brush once more, but now by God he didn't have any what you'd call bounce left in him. The kid had emptied his gun by this time to no purpose, but I'd hit him. I'd rammed one right in his guts and that took the wind out of his sails. That's what I meant by stunning him."

"Then what?" the fellow had rolled his newspaper and was tapping it against his knee. "What then? You must have trailed him. Invariably, they'll find a hard place to die."

I looked at this fellow again. I still recall those words. The older man had been listening all the while, watching as the guard told his story. The guard was relishing his limelight.

"But you trailed him?" the older man asked, though it wasn't really a question.

"I did. Me and the kid, we trailed him. But the kid wasn't good for much. He got sick on the trail. Slowed us down, that knothead." He had to laugh now, thinking about that situation. "Drinking beer and chasing all night, then thinking he can hunt deer the next day. He knows better now, by God. But we trailed him. A good trail, too. There was blood on the ground and blood on the leaves and honeysuckle. Blood everywhere. There was even blood on those pine trees he leant against, resting up. Never seen an old buck with so much blood. I don't know how he kept going. But it started to get dark on us, and we had to go back. I was worried about the old man, too, but I needn't have worried, as it turns out."

"Sometimes they'll just go forever. But invariably they'll find them a hard place to die." the fellow with the newspaper said, repeating himself for good measure.

"I chewed the kid out good for missing his shot in the first place, and when he started to say something back, I cuffed him I was so mad. Right here." He pointed to the side of his head and grinned. "I boxed his ears for him, that damn kid. He's not too old. He needed it."

"Well, the coyotes'll have that deer now," the fellow said. "Them and the crows and buzzards." He unrolled his newspaper, smoothed it out and put it off to one side. He crossed a leg again. He looked around at the rest of us and shook his head. But it didn't look like it mattered much one way or the other

to him.

The older man had turned in his chair and was looking out the window at the dim morning sun. He lit a cigarette.

"I figure so," the guard said. "It's a pity. He was a big old son of a bitch. I wish I had his horns over my garage. But so in answer to your question, Bill, I both got my deer and didn't get him. But we had venison on the table anyway, it turns out. The old man had got himself a little spike in the meantime. He already had him back to camp, hanging up and gutted slick as a whistle. Had the liver, heart, and kidneys wrapped in waxed paper and placed in the cooler already. He heard us coming down and met us just outside of camp. He held out his hands just all covered with dried blood. Didn't say a word. Old fart scared me at first. I didn't know for a minute what'd happened. Old hands looked like they'd been painted. 'Looky,' he said"—and here the guard held out his own plump hands—" 'Looky here at what I've done.' Then we stepped into the light and I seen his little deer hanging there. A little spike. Just a little bastard, but the old man he was tickled to death. Me and the kid didn't have anything to show for our day, except the kid, he was still hung-over and pissed-off and had a sore ear." He laughed and looked around the shop, as if remembering. Then he picked up his toothpick and stuck it back into his mouth.

The older man put his cigarette out and turned to Charles. He drew a breath and said, "You ought to be out there right now looking for that deer instead of in here getting a haircut. That's a disgusting story." Nobody said anything. A look of wonderment passed over the guard's features. He blinked his eyes. "I don't know you and I don't want to know you, but I don't think you or your kid or your old man ought to be allowed out in the woods with other hunters."

"You can't talk like that," the guard said. "You old asshole. I've seen you someplace."

"Well, I haven't seen you before. I'd recollect if I'd seen your fat face before."

"Boys, that's enough. This is my barbershop. It's my place of business. I can't have this."

"I ought to box *your* ears," the older man said. I thought for a minute he was going to pull up out of his chair. But his shoulders were rising and falling, and he was having a visible difficulty with his breathing.

"You ought to try it," the guard said.

"Charles, Albert's a friend of mine," the barber said. He had put his comb and scissors on the counter and had his hands on my shoulders now, as if I was thinking to spring from the chair into the middle of it. "Albert, I've been cutting Charles's head of hair, and his boy's too, for years now. I wish you wouldn't pursue this." He looked from one man to the other and kept his hands on my shoulders.

"Take it outside," the invariably fellow said, flushed and hoping for something.

“That’ll be enough,” the barber said. “I don’t want to have to be calling the law. Charles, I don’t want to hear anything more on the subject. Albert, you’re next in line, so if you’ll just hold on a minute until I’m finished with this man. Now,” he turned to invariably, “I don’t know you from Adam, but it would help things if you’d not put your oar in again.”

The guard got up and said, “I think I’ll come back for my cut later, Bill. Right now the company leaves something to be desired.” He went out without looking at anybody and pulled the door closed, hard.

The older man sat there smoking his cigarette. He looked out the window for a minute, and then he examined something on the back of his hand. Then he got up and put on his hat.

“I’m sorry, Bill. That guy pushed a button, I guess. I can wait a few more days for a haircut. I don’t have any engagements but one. I’ll be seeing you next week.”

“You come around next week then, Albert. You take it easy now. You hear? That’s all right, Albert.”

The man went outside, and the barber stepped over to the window to watch him go. “Albert’s about dead from emphysema,” he said from the window. “We used to fish together. He taught me everything there is to know about salmon fishing. The women. They used to just flock after him, that old boy. He’s picked up a temper though in his later years. But I can’t say, in all honesty, if there wasn’t some provocation this morning.” We watched him through the window get into his truck and shut the door. Then he started the pickup engine and drove away.

Invariably couldn’t sit still. He was on his feet and moving around the shop now, stopping to examine everything, the old wooden hat rack, photos of Bill and his friends holding stringers of fish, the calendar from the hardware store showing pictures of outdoor scenes for each month of the year—he flipped every page and came back to October—even going so far as to stand and scrutinize the barber’s license which was up on the wall at the end of the counter. He stood first on one foot and then the other, reading the fine print. Then he turned to the barber and said, “I think I’m going to get going too and come back later. I don’t know about you, but I need a beer.” He went out quickly, and we heard his car start.

“Well, do you want me to finish barbering this hair or not?” the barber said to me in a rough manner, as if I was the cause of this.

Somebody else came in then, a man wearing a jacket and tie. “Hello, Bill. What’s happening?”

“Hello, Frank. Nothing worth repeating. What’s new with you?”

“Nothing, the man said. He hung his jacket on the hat rack and loosened his tie. Then he sat down in a chair and picked up invariably’s newspaper.

The barber turned me in the chair to face the mirror. He put a hand on either side of my head and positioned me a last time. He brought his head down next to mine and we looked into the mirror together, his hands still encircling my head. I looked at myself, and he also looked at me. But if he saw something

fingers back and forth through my hair, slowly, as if thinking of something else the while. He ran his fingers through my hair as intimately, as tenderly, as a lover's fingers.

That was in Crescent City, California, up near the Oregon border. I left soon after. But today I was thinking of that place, Crescent City, and my attempt at a new life there with my wife, and how even then, in the chair that morning, I had made up my mind to leave and not look back. I recalled the calm I felt when I closed my eyes and let the fingers move through my hair, the sadness in those fingers, the hair already starting to grow again.