

Okatooga Warhammer

by Jason W. Stuart

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They looked like girl's jeans. Matt held them against himself in the mirror. Not that girl's jeans were a mark against them. Usually, girls had better jeans anyway. Matt took two of the biggest pairs out of the big chest in his grandmother's back closet. He hadn't decided whether or not he would go through with it. He didn't even know if they would fit. Matt thought the flare at the bottom was a little extreme. He didn't know why Hank liked that so much. But, what Matt didn't know about his father could easily fill ten of these chests.

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The first thing Matt Grady hated about the float down the river with his physics class was exactly that; he was spending two full days with most powerful group of asslicks in the whole county. The feelings he had toward the majority of his classmates were easily reciprocated for multiple reasons, though the primary being that he was some no-name redmud who suddenly led the Liberty football team to two playoff wins for the first time since the 80's, and he was cocky as hell about it. He'd made sure everybody knew he was offered academic scholarships to both Tennessee and California but had turned them down to play football in Austin, Texas—Austin? Coincidence? Fate? He'd already started wearing his blue cap turned backwards with the big white *A* facing front which would become his trademark.

The bus ride up Highway 11 made Matt think about the way things had changed. Every five miles or so there was another gas station, used car lot and road sign advertising some seasonal bullshit up in Coalwater. Matt could just barely remember riding the roads with his brother, Tom, and there was nothing all the way up Highway 11 but one old vegetable stand run by Bobby Nutall who used to own half that land anyway. He'd sold out nearly six years ago

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and bought a ranch outside of Butte, Montana. Matt had heard it was nice up there and wanted to go sometime. Milk River. Powder. Yellowstone. Tom killed a bear in Yellowstone.

As the bus ambled along the forty some odd miles from Liberty to Coalwater, Matt wondered why he, in fact, had come on this trip. He'd always wanted to come up and ride the river with Tom. Tom had been saying he would be down to visit soon—for the past four years. He'd ridden off that day for California and that was the last Matt had seen of him. Supposedly, he was doing well. Matt'd finally given up trying to talk to anyone about Tom. No one wanted to believe in such a creature anymore. Tom Grady belonged to a past most people would rather never really existed. No one gets in car chases. No one can pitch boulders as a tot. There was no bomb. And certainly no one kills a grizzly bear unarmed in the modern world. *Common Era*: What the fuck?

Football was real enough, though. That was all too apparent. Matt would have gone completely unnoticed had it not been for the all-star receiver who transferred in from Nebraska the past summer and showed up for two-a-days and kept outrunning anything the old starter could pass him. Matt stepped up and tattooed one into his chest from thirty yards. It got the coaches' attention. The new kid's father was chief of surgery at Collierville Methodist; his money had the school board's attention. Anyone who allowed the new kid to shine was given a length of rope.

Culloden County had completely changed. Coalwater was growing more and more fake every day. It was nothing but bullshit antique shops and overpriced restaurants that didn't season food—so as not upset the gentle palates of their varied clientele; that meant the Yups. Liberty was near as bad. There were almost no farms left—just subdivided housing, shitty coffee bars, and two bridal shops now.

“You ever been up there on the river before?” Chet asked. *Chet*. They were all in a race to have worst names.

“No.”

It wasn't completely true. Matt had never floated the Okatooga. Back when he had his dirt bike, he rode all across the county,

sometimes out all night. He camped along the river more than once—just himself, a bag of chips and a jacket. He missed that. In the last year Matt was thrust into the spotlight of the school social scene. He wasn't used to dealing with people—especially those his own age. He could do well enough with some of the old timers out at Smith's Grocery once in a while. Matt had grown right fond of Austin—even got him to help build his final project, a Rube Goldberg coke machine that was twelve feet tall and eighteen feet long and was so big Austin hauled it to class on a flatbed trailer. It was by far the biggest one on Ms. Spinks' class record. Got a 95. Bitch.

Aside from Culloden Mountain opposite the lake, which wasn't a real mountain at all—there are no mountains in Mississippi—but a sort of joke carried down from the old hillbillies who first came here, there were just foothills really. They were a bad batch of rocky bluffs and jagged edges all along either side of the skinny river—itsself more of a creek. The Devil's Backbone, it'd once been called, though few still called it that. They made for decent landscape along the part of the river that formed the north border of the county and helped give it several one and two's and even a few class three chutes. It wasn't exactly the Colorado or the Nantahala but it was cheap, close, and it would do. The shuttle ran April through Labor Day out of Coalwater Outfitters, a division of Grand Vistas National Outdoor Recreation. They'd bought out old Hart Cameron a few years back and streamlined the whole business. The whole thing had always been a front for Hart to run whisky anyway.

“All right, guys and gals,” Ms. Spinks said as the bus stopped. “We're going to go ahead and unpack our gear into the cabins and then we'll meet up with Tony, our guide on the river and go over some basic river safety rules before we hit the water.”

Ms. Spinks' former husband taught down at Collierville College of the Arts and Sciences, a low-rent liberal arts school for people who weren't good enough to go anywhere decent but wanted to pretend to be intellectual nonetheless. He'd left her to have a fling with one of his students two years ago and she decided to revamp her image and become an outdoor adventurer. She needed to drop about thirty

more pounds to really sell it. But it meant a fall hike through Blaecwud Forest and in the spring, the river run.

While all the other assholes piled into the bunkhouse to become engrossed in quibbling about who would be tops and bottoms—a debate they found it impossible to engage in without laughing sadistically—Matt just tossed his bag inside and grabbed his game ball from their last playoff win. He tossed it up and caught it over and over trying to drum everything else out and was doing decently at it until Marshall Deveraux slapped it out of the air and went to chuckling.

Matt just sighed in irritation.

“What about it, QB WT?” Marshall taunted. WT, it was their little pet name for him. They didn't much like it that he'd been plucked out and planted in their white and tidy little country club world. They might as well just call him “nigger” and be done with it, but, oh, that was a word they didn't use. Only rednecks used that word. But, go check the demographic of their gated community. “Huh?” he reiterated. “Huh?” He pushed his chest as close to Matt's as he could without actually touching. He was another one of these stamped out mass-produced, pink polo shirt-wearing future date-rapists that the whole country was turning into if TV was any honest window. Apparently the idea was that Matt should hit him or some such idiocy. Because, well, that's what white trash does, isn't it? “Well? What are you gonna do, hotshot?”

Matt shrugged. “I don't know. Go to Texas. Play in a national championship. Go pro. Be famous. Something like that I guess,” Matt said and walked over to pick up his ball. He considered for a moment the irony of a football player being heckled.

He caught a glimpse of Lauren Hurley taking her stuff off the bus and heading into the girl's bunkhouse. She was the closest thing to a human he'd come across at Liberty High during his four year tenure. They sat next to each other in Ms. Bounds' A.P. U.S. Government class. Once, she had invited him to a party at her house. She was blonde.

His next thought was, naturally, of Lacy Parker—Tom's old sort-of-but-not-really girlfriend from high school. Matt had gone to the trouble of looking up what ever happened to her after she left Liberty. She'd gone to law school in California and had just started with a firm in L.A. somewhere. Odd. Tom had been in San Fran off and on for years boxing and working the nightclubs. Ten to one's they never knew the other was that close, Matt figured. Funny old world.

Tony, the guide, turned out to be a skinnyleg assbag from L.A. who couldn't have sucked harder if he spent a year practicing on tow-hitches. He was one of those thin all over types like he lived off tofu and cannabis. Probably did. He had long brown Barbie doll hair and just a hint of a scraggly beard. He stretched out his vowels when he talked.

“Heey guuy's I'm Tooony,” he said. “I'm your guide for the river today, m'kay? Let's just go over a few safety rules before we get to our rafts, K? First of all how many of you know the legend of the Okatooga?”

No answer. Matt winced inside—fearing the suck.

“No one? The Screaming River? Anybody?”

Ahh damn it. There it was: the great wall of shittiness that was all life. What a goddamn asshole.

“They say the Okatoogas were some of the last of the holdouts against Indian Removal. Uh huh. They refused to be moved off their land and were embanked along the river until the army came in and opened fire into their camp killing them all. That's why they say you can still hear their screams on certain nights of the year.”

This guy deserved to die a rotten death along with all other shitty fucks. Matt wanted to bean him in the eye with something. He hadn't the slightest clue where all this ‘Screaming River’ bullshit came from all of a sudden. There was the *Singing* River down in Pascagoula--but that involved two Indian tribes; not as conveniently politically valuable as whites shooting Indians. Then there was Screaming Woman Road south of Boon, but no one really knew

about that anymore. It was closed off these days anyway. The river itself had been the scene of Cherokee Bob's last stand against a platoon of Yankees. This whole Indian bullshit was completely made up. Matt wanted to slap him in the face with his ignorance, but decided, in fact, the best revenge against a goddamn idiot is to let him go on being a goddamn idiot.

“And moving on to my first point about safety, I want you to take a look at the paddles we'll be using.” He held one up by its handle. “This is the T-grip. You want to keep your hand on this at all times. Don't grip by the shaft. We have someone every year get jabbed in the eye by someone's T-grip because of improper procedure. It's so common we've even given it a nickname, the Okatooga Warhammer.”

At that, Toony began waving it back and forth in some odd tomahawk motion.

More suck.

After that Matt, left for Eternia where he considered the practicality of riding a cat into battle. Supposedly the goddess Freya—Freyja's Daeg-Freitag-Friday—had two big cats that pulled her war-chariot. That seemed much more sensible. Matt's daddy, Hank, had said Mack George used to have a pet tiger. Matt wondered if that was true.

When Matt came back Toony was talking about mandatory helmet-wearing. Shitty.

Once the group got all geared up and ready for the river they loaded up on the Coalwater Outfitters bus—a stripped down utilitarian version of what they rode up in. It was about another twenty minute drive to the put-in, mostly because they were going so slow through the little winding river roads. The trees were overhanging so much they almost wanted to reach in and grab Matt by the waist and haul him off the bus. There was a sleepiness to these old roads and Matt thought of his trips here on his bike. It was nice to see that some parts of the county were still much the same.

The original meaning of the word Okatooga is lost now. Oka, Matt knew, meant usually water or pool. Tooga was probably some badly

anglicized spelling of some Indian word now forgotten. Most people just assumed it meant river--altogether. The particular band of Indians who had lived here, people called the Okatoogas--because they mostly lived near the river in the hills. They were a mix of Choctaw and Cherokee. It was the highlanders that brought them down with Jackson and had founded the county, then just a settlement, if that. Made sense enough to Matt. From the pristine look of the river and the hills, this was the best part of the whole county. He could only assume the fishing and hunting were the best, too.

Culloden County was strange in its history. For one thing there wasn't much to speak of before the Civil War. A bunch of Scottish families, leftovers from the '45, had trickled down the Jackson road, some even before it was the Jackson road. They'd seen the summit and some old timer had made mention it reminded him of the old country, the way it looked down on the deep lake. And, the weather in Southern Miss is a sight prettier than Northern Scotland or even the Smokies, so they they planted right down. Culloden was more an idea in their heads as none would've been old enough to have been there, but their fathers and grandfathers had.

But, no one else on the river that day knew any of that. Matt had made it his obsession of late to pore through old county histories and had long conversations with the oldest dudes in the county he could find. He had written an essay that caught the interest of the people out at UCLA, about his theory of a band of practicing pagan Celts holing up in Culloden County before the Civil War. He only had conjecture, however—nothing solid. And besides, he only attracted the Anthropology and Literature departments' interest. Texas gave the promise of a nice, fat championship ring.

The water was colder than the sweat off a witch's back. Matt had opted out of the wetsuit—which supposedly dried faster—and was now questioning his decision. He shared a raft with Mallie the lazy-eye girl and James and Walter, the two smallest boys in class. Their guide was Ariel, a thirty-something river-hippy—someone who had done this a while and landed in Culloden County and never had

moved on. Happened sometimes. Culloden County was an easy place to get by in. Ariel was a spot-on pro at the riverwork but she wasn't a hoss by any stretch of the brain and so Matt was considerably unmatched by the others in his boat and constantly had to pull his strokes short to keep from twisting them about. It also meant that they persistently lagged behind throughout the day.

Not to say that the trip was all bad or a waste by any means. The river was good, as most rivers are. Just often enough to keep Matt grounded, they shot round a bend or curve or hooked past some big rocks through some rolling water. It was still pretty cold—the water—and gave Matt a rush every time some hit him. It was nice, not like on the field, but enough.

Around noon they beached for lunch and flipped one raft to use as a buffet table. Just sandwich gear and that sort of fare. There was a big tray of condiments with a big bowl of some pale-yellow paste in the middle that no one in the group seemed to account for. Matt himself was a little perplexed and sniffed it.

“Smells like beans,” he said.

There wasn't nearly enough to be had and Matt was full aware most eyes were on how much he would suck down. Size was becoming more unattractive each year, it seemed. Matt blamed MTV and the anorexic movement. He pined for fall and counting himself tiny next to his Texas teammates. It'd be nice to feel normal again--like it had been with Tom.

Fortunately, Matt brought two powerbars and augmented his meal with that. Not the most appealing, but at least he wouldn't fatigue now for the second half of the ride.

“Hey,” Toony's voice called out. “Who jellied my hummus?”

Hummus. Of course. Should have known that. Kicked himself.

The river rats were an interesting bunch, aside from Toony. Most of them were somewhere between twenty and thirty. The guys were mostly thinner, but cut up like they just walked off a magazine shoot. Two of them, Randy and Floyd, were busy taking turns seeing who could shimmy up the rope swing and slap the branch the fastest.

Seemed an interesting endeavor and Matt wondered if he might not try in a second.

"Why did you come on this trip?" Lauren asked. Matt hadn't even noticed her walk up. Strange how that worked. In the middle of a play, he would see everything. At rest, a wailing ambulance could sneak up on him.

"What do you mean?" Matt asked looking up at her from the remains of his powerbars.

"You just sit off by yourself and don't talk to anyone. Like you always do. So, why come on a trip with people you don't talk to?"

What the fuck was her deal? He wasn't bothering nobody. Jesus, can't he just sit and eat his lunch and watch people muck about on a rope without being called a jerk? Guess not.

"Because I like the river," Matt said, then jumped up and took his turn on the rope and hand-over-handed it all the way to the top a sight quicker than anyone yet. Then he slid back down, took the rope back to a decent vantage and swung out into the river and made as big a splash as he could muster. Hadn't he done this same thing before?

The cold water hit him like bricks. When he topped, he was moving fast downriver and Toony and Teach were screaming some bullshit at him about the water being too high. Had they mentioned that earlier? Was that why the raft guides hadn't jumped in themselves? Made sense, suddenly. Oh well.

Matt shot down the little straightaway with the current. He knew enough about the river to know he wasn't in a great situation. Rocks ahead. He had to figure a way out of this quick. Out the corner of his eye, he spied Toony barreling through the brush and hit the rocks just ahead of him and started hopping them like an Olympic hurdler. Matt was taken by the efficiency in which the guy moved. Focused. Flawless. Now this was something.

Moving back to his problem at hand, Matt spotted a thick vine hanging over a fat rock and slapping about in the water right in his way. Convenient, that. Just before Toony got close enough to reach out his hand, Matt snatched the vine, jerked himself upright and was

up on a rock in no time. He shivered and shook out as much water from his hair as he could. Should he cut it? Nah. Not yet.

"That was a hell of a good run," Matt said.

"You're crazy," he yelled--apparently unhappy. In less than a year people would be paying good money to see work like this.

Ungrateful. "You're lucky to even be alive!"

"Not really," Matt said.

Toony gave him a confused look.

"I don't think luck had anything to do with it," Matt added.

He looked back at the vine, at the river. It was moving awful fast. He thought about the rope. The game. School. The last four years. Where had it gone? How did he do it? He couldn't remember when it started. He would get the headaches all the time. So bad he couldn't see. Only at night, usually. Alone. Still. On the field, taking a test, anything that required focus--it went away. Clear. It all made itself open to him. Time was slower the faster he went. That didn't make sense. Is that how... There was Hank. How had he done it?

Of course, even Hank found his limit.

Hank.

He had longer hair, too.

Matt had almost no memory of his father. Hank Grady. Everybody knew Hank Grady. Matt didn't. Died when Matt was eight. Eight. Before that Hank was a truck driver. Hot shot and cross country. There were a few pictures. They played cards. Matt remembered poker. Gin rummy. Hank was a legend, even then. Was he? More of a myth now. Time. Things forgotten.

Supposedly they looked a lot alike, now Matt's hair was longer. With it short he was the skinny version of Tom--not that Matt was actually skinny, more that Tom was a massive giant. Matt's hair was darker than his father's, though. Still, it was enough his mother wished he would cut it. She didn't like to remember. Supposedly she had loved him. Why wouldn't she? Why did she?

A Kaiser blade sliced through Matt's brain when he got back to the riverbank. That's what it always felt like. It was almost crippling. He tried to move and couldn't. He couldn't let on, though. No one

could know. Should they? Maybe he ought to tell someone. A doctor? Why? No. Ruin it. Fuck it all up. Texas. The game. The ring. For glory? No. For hate.

A quick burst of pushups cleared the headache and Matt was ready to go. Ms. Spinks gave him the one-eye as they geared up for the second half. She'd be calling his mother later on. What's wrong with your son? Fuck off. He seems to have issues. Issues? What does that even mean? Idiots make up their own language and get annoyed when other people don't know it. Sound. It doesn't mean anything.

The second half reminded him of the first. There was one really great rapid that they weren't allowed to run through because the water was up too high and it was "too dangerous." Scared. Fuck it. After that they hit the west end of the lake. They were met with a speedboat and all tied up and motored back to the outfitter.

After they all geared down and got ready to head for the lodge for dinner and some weird slideshow Ms. Spinks had planned, Matt stood outside in the yard alone. There was one oak tree outside the main house of the outfitters. It wasn't in bloom. It was so old its branches leaned almost to the ground. Sad to be left alone. Oak trees were special. Sacred. For a moment, Matt thought he saw something in the tree, like he was staring at someone he knew from a long time back, someone he shouldn't even remember. He couldn't explain it, even in his mind. But, he felt someone was looking back at him, too. The moment passed. Matt looked up and saw clouds rolling in. Darker. He held out his arms and wondered if it could rain on only him.

He could feel the sideways glances as the others walked out onto the porch.

The slideshow was stupid. Who would have guessed? It was a lame montage of images from the last few years. The same shit they show at the awards day for the graduating seniors that Matt made sure to miss.

After dinner, the guys and girls went off to their respective bunks to wait the appropriate amount of time before all sneaking off to

town to stay out all night trying to get drunk. Most of them had brought enough of their own gear to get the job done twice over and so the going to town bit was just for rebellion's sake. Was it rebellion if it was both expected and practically encouraged? Theatrics. Run the play as it's called.

There were no real bars in Coalwater anyway. It was a dry county. Maybe they didn't remember that. There were a few restaurants with special permission to serve alcohol but they all closed at eleven. It was nearly ten before everyone even went out. But, there was a pool hall and some other spots open later.

Then there was the Countyline. Matt didn't know if his classmates knew of it. It was named for the obvious and was the only spot that would be serving liquor all night. It was also an old jukejoint and where, supposedly, Hank had haunted often as not back in his day. No doubt a rough sort of place. Dingy. Smelly. Old timers bar. A joint. Locals from way back. Sounded great.

Matt jerked out his satchel and took out the jeans. He'd been to see his Grandma Ruth a few weeks ago. While there he got to rummaging through some of his father's old things. Matt's mother had wanted to get rid of it all--no reminders. Ruth refused to let it get thrown away. She said she'd keep it for him. It was the least she owed him. Matt hadn't known what that meant. He only knew later that Hank and his daddy had never got along. Something fierce, apparently. Matt's grandpa had been a preacher.

The jeans were Hank's. Matt slid them on and they barely got over his butt. He had to pull and tug for a while to get them situated just right. Jesus Fuck they were tight. How the hell had Hank worn shit like this all the time? Matt knew his dad had been skinnier than he was, but not this much. He almost had to find a pair of pliers to zip them up. As it was, he did some squats in them for a while until they loosened up enough he could move around in them.

They didn't look too damn bad, all told.

He pulled on his boots and stuck on a ten dollar cowboy hat he bought at the truck stop on Highway 11 and dove into a pool with to give a good shape. And there it was. Spitting image.

When the ghost of Hank Grady walked into the Countyline roadhouse that night, Charlette, the waitress, spilled her tray and dropped to the floor. Some guy to the left laid a five on the table and slid out the door. Voices in the background got slightly quieter and the only sound discernable was Dwight humming on about his Cadillac.

"Holy Shit!" some man's voice called out from the back of the room.

The moment went. Things resumed.

Through the thick of his shades, Matt spotted Toony--well, Tony, after all, maybe. He was chucking darts with some other skinny guy and a rough-looking girl--rougher than the rest, anyway.

Stacy Lee Tolbert was there with her Gibson strapped to her back like Cash and was gabbing with Turly the barman and brushing off some would be man-groupie. Didn't know she was playing this evening. Turned out she'd been the one to load the box with Yoakam to play through her break so some other shitbird wouldn't fuck with her vibe.

Austin Grantham was there, too, seeing how fast he could spin himself on his barstool and then kill a beer. He seemed to be besting some backward-capped half-yup from probably down in Liberty. Long way off, that one. Collierville bars were a lot closer. Matt gave him a nod once he caught his eye and Austin just motioned him over.

"Buy me a whisky, Hank," he said. "I'm near broke from horsing around here with these kids."

Matt one-eyed him through his glasses. Surely Austin wasn't that far gone. But, then, he did tie them on pretty hard. Matt pulled out a twenty. It was all the money he had. He'd thought about trying to work more regular, but it interfered too much with training. The ring was everything. Everything. For himself. For Tom. For all of them. Everything dead and dying.

"Two whiskies, Turly," Austin called out. The barman eyeballed Matt pretty hard and Austin cussed him for being slow and to let his good friend and competitor be. Turly went to pouring Oak-barrel

bourbon and Austin turned to Matt and winked at him. "You win that contest?"

Matt didn't know at all what he meant and after concluding that Austin did, in fact, know it was him and not Hank, he assumed then he must be referring to the Rube-Goldberg machine. "Yep," Matt said. Despite the fact it wasn't really a contest, he still considered himself having beaten everyone else.

"What the hell you doing all the way up here?" Matt asked as he was handed a shot.

"Stackolee, Stackolee!" Austin said, holding his glass up high.

That didn't make much sense even for Austin.

Then, of course, there was the problem that Matt didn't really drink bourbon. Austin wanted to shoot them together for old times' sake and Matt had to oblige and nearly coughed himself blue afterward.

Stacy Lee was staring at him from across the bar and Matt wondered what Hank had ever done in her life. Charlette had recomposed herself and come over wanting to say something but then no word came out.

"It's okay," Matt said taking off the glasses. He could barely see shit anyway. He hadn't the slightest clue why the fuck his father had ever carried on with them all the time like he did. Surely, he took them off to drive at night. Or, maybe not. Hank Grady could drive like the devil and twice as hard, so they said.

Matt tried to shoot a game of pool with Austin but was beat straight off the break. No matter, he sucked too bad to have had a chance anyway. Why is that old dudes are always awesome at every dumb sport like pool and bowling and darts and cards? Matt sucked at the lot but for darts. He had a mean aim. Obviously.

Dwight finished his set and Stacy got ready for her second of the evening and lit off with her own version of *Guitar Man*. Seemed odd but sounded good.

There was one really old man sitting alone at a table in the center of the room drinking white lightning and Matt wondered at who the hell would voluntarily consume that when there were other options.

The more Matt watched him, the odder he seemed. He had a gold pocket watch and checked it about every other minute and his left boot tapped almost independently of himself to the music coming at him. His coat--not that Matt thought anyone needed one, it was smoky and humid enough in there--had a thick fur collar on top of some kind of fine leather. That had to be Mack George, if anybody--the original owner of the legendary Killafella. Who just gives away a racecar? A billionaire. Jesus. He was just nuts enough Matt could actually respect him despite his money.

Matt stood in the corner half the evening holding his pool cue in a pose despite the fact he only played the one game. He still caught the bulk of the stares aimed his way. Eventually, Tony walked over just to verify his eyes worked all right.

"I thought that was you," he said smiling. "They let you in here?" How was Matt to politely explain to him that he belonged here a long mile sooner than Tony California and his Yuppie cohorts, that these were Matt's people, not his, that this was Matt's home; *this* was Culloden County. Nevermind it was the other side of the line.

"Hey, don't sweat it," Tony added for lack of response. "I don't care. Hell, that was some wild stunt you pulled today. We're not supposed to say so, but I thought it was cool. Liabilities. All that shit. Buy you a beer?"

Matt just looked at him. Funny old world, after all.

"You know what?" Matt said. "I think I owe you one. Hey Austin!" Matt motioned for him. "Grab a pitcher and come have a drink with the guy who almost saved my life."

Matt shook Tony's hand by way of some acknowledgment.

"Well, I didn't really do anything," Tony argued.

"Yeah," Matt said. "But you made a really good run today. That was pretty slick work on those rocks. You ever play any ball?"

"Soccer all through high school," Tony said.

Well, nobody's perfect.

* * *

Matt closed down the bar with Tony and the others. Austin spent the rest of the night regaling the outsiders with county lore, the

many legends of Hank, and before the evening was done their table had attracted a gathering of half the bar, Mack George even looking on for some while with a wry smile. Tony seemed enraptured with the whole thing. Kitschy, no doubt he was thinking, Matt figured.

As they each piled out of the bar to go separate ways, as many going out of their way to shake Matt's hand as Stacy Lee's, he got a wrench in his gut. He'd just spent the whole night with a room of strangers, most of whom were part of a past that created him yet he could never belong to--each one of which had some kind of experience or relationship with the man Matt could see in the mirror everyday but would never know.

Matt crunched the sunglasses on the walk back to the camp. Next year he would be in Texas.

