

Treading Water

by Ron Earl Phillips

I am going to die.

* * *

I was nine when I saw my first dead body.

During the summers growing up, I lived with my cousin Whit and his Dad.

Whit's dad owned a cabin down along the Greenbrier. We spent those summers picking berries, hunting squirrels and coons, and wandering the woods and shores along the river.

It was mid-July and the river was so shallow in places you could practically walk across. It was an easy swim either way. So Whit and I trunked across and made our way up the river bank about a mile up to Chandler Creek to an abandon fishing shack that sat just above where Chandler met the Greenbrier.

We liked to nose around and have fun at the shack. There was a nice pool of water that fed off the slow currents.

That's where we found the body.

At first we didn't know that's what it was. We'd hauled all kinds of garbage out of our favorite fishing hole. Old tires, trash bags left behind and even once a mattress.

Walking up to it it looked like garbage. Flies were buzzing busily about it.

Whit took a branch and started poking at it, as I ankled in to the pool.

The smell of it burned to the back of my throat and I gagged.

It bobbed in the water as Whit poked at it, then an arm came free from underneath.

A fat fleshy hand with fish nipped fingers waved at me.

I staggered back out of the pool with a scream.

* * *

Around the turn, Cranmer Ferry Road vanished where it usually snakes between the mountain and the Mud River.

* * *

Whit sat outside the gates inside an old white Chevy with a sloop back. I was never good with cars, but it looked to be the same one his dad tooled around in when we were kids. It was old then.

He waved me across the road. The rain was relentless.

“You picked a hellava time to get released Cuz.”

He said as I slid into the bucket seat beside him, tossing my trash bag of belongings in the back seat.

I looked out Whit's window at the gates of Mount Olive — my home for the last twenty-three months — one last time.

“They don't generally give you a choice.”

I tried to smile, but it didn't take.

He threw the car in gear and we cut down the road.

“So what do you want to do?”

The rain hammered the windshield as the wipers sloshed back and forth. My mouth began to whet.

“I could use a cold beer or six. Why don't we stop off and get a case?”

Whit smiled.

“I know just the place.”

* * *

When I whipped the white Chevy around the flashing barricade, the patrolman, covered in raingear desperately tried to wave me down. All I could think about was I was less than two hours out of prison with a pistol lying on the passenger seat and Whit knocked out in the trunk.

Whit had gotten me in trouble again and I wasn't about to go back.

* * *

As quickly Cranmer Ferry Road vanished, Whit's Chevy slid sideways over a slight embankment down into the Mud River. Sinking and floating all at once. The water hugged the old white sloop back Chevy and the doors wouldn't budge.

The river water slithered through every crevice the old car had available, racing the outside flow to the roof.

I wasn't going to die. Not after doing twenty-three months. Not for Whit.

Whit?

* * *

We pulled into Charlie's Git N Go. I went in ahead, while Whit topped the tank.

The bell jingled and old Charlie Danver look up from a cart of cigarettes he was marking. A great big smile grew out of the forest of white whiskers.

"Bobby Talbot, that you boy? I ain't seen you around in a good while. Seen that no good cousin of yours a bit too often. All squirrely each time he comes by."

I shuffled, "Yeah I've been away. Whit's out at the pump." I thumbed behind me.

The bell rang again. Charlie's eyes went wide.

"Boys, I don't want no trouble."

"Then you best step aside and let us do what we came here to do."

I turned and there Whit stood with a nickel plated revolver pointed square at the round belly of Charlie Danver. I didn't say anything, I just swung my arm down hard on his pistol hand. The gun flung to the floor.

"What the fuck, Bobby. They make you a sissy in the pen?"

He tried to crack knuckles to my jaw, but I shifted as the bony fist swished by. I used the momentum to throw my knee into his gut, following up a hard fist to the side of his head as he went prone.

I picked up the gun, tucking it in my belt, and then grabbed Whit's slack body by the arm.

"We wasn't here" I told old Charlie Danver as I drug Whit out the door.

* * *

The trunk of the white Chevy was open, so I threw Whit in, thinking when he came to he'd have time to cool down before I let him out. Last thing I needed was for him to throw a fit as I was racing as far away from Charlie's Git N Go.

The car was all but submerged and if I didn't do something soon the car and the trunk would be our watery casket.

The water inside was swaddling my waste and the water outside pressed hard against the doors.

I took the revolver, pulled hard on the trigger. Again and again. The empty chambers rolled one after the other.

Click. Click. Click.

"Damn it, Whit!" Who brings an empty gun to a robbery.

Outside the car was bobbing its last bobs. Inside my chest soaked with river water. I slammed the pistol butt against the window. The water absorbed the hit.

Not much time left.

I am going to die.

I remembered Chandler Creek. I was going to be that body.

* * *

I dreamed of illuminated fish swimming under the shore, slashing streaks of light and bursting in thunderclaps, one after another. I was floating free, lifting through the bubbling waters up towards a tunnel of light.

I was ready.

A thunderclap hammered my chest, my heart seized.

I coughed a spout of water and tried to sit up.

"Relax there son. You're going to be alright."

I coughed more and sat up anyway, the cold mud of the bank against my palms.

The rain was no more than a drizzle as the sun finally broke.

The Mud River was a torrent of brown water, swallowing anything its wake.

It would be days, maybe weeks, before Whit's car was pulled from its muddy base.

