

I

I rested my chin on the raw edge of the boat where the oar handle gnawed at the green paint. It took me three days to travel the length of St. Margaret's river, between the fork where it goes south and the Gulf of Mexico. I never entered the Gulf, just floated up to the brackish water where manatees don't bother to dodge propellers. I rowed most of the time. The motor seemed a noisy disturbance to my mission. I slept in the boat last night, in an unzipped bag. Things crawled inside with me, but I didn't mind. I have learned to live with this river, to keep perfectly still when a spider stretches its legs across my chest, probably like moving over a continent to him. He isn't a creature that needs killing. If he leans back on his hind legs and exposes a proboscis, I can fold forward and squash him in a body vise. But that never happened. He drifted onto the wooden slat that serves as a boat seat then into a strand of moss that swept the boat. If he came back, he did so while I slept. I lay in a puddle by morning. Rain had pounded this North Florida river where purple hyacinths carpet the clear running water, and anhinga birds perch in dead cypress trees, spreading their black wings to dry like vampires in a take-off pattern. On the

Glynn Marsh Alam

fourth day, cloudless and breezeless, a sore bursa throbbed in my shoulder, and my back muscles tore against the spine. The struggle to move the boat hadn't seemed so bad, but my head dizzied when I tried to sit. From my position on my belly, I tipped the urn over for the last time. A few remaining gray-white particles hit the water, disappearing, perhaps dissolving, too small to follow with my eyes. One last ash floated, bobbing away from shore toward the depths of the river. It swayed, nearly jumping from the surface in the wake of a motorboat, then came to the edge of a small eddy. Twirling, it rotated to the center, then disappeared into the abyss, maybe to rest at the bottom in a crop of dark green eel grass. I envied that ash. Eel grass at the bottom of a river made sense. I rested my chin on the boat until it went numb, then I shut my eyes. I wished my entire body numb.

II

“I lived my good days on that river.” Grandma Pope’s words had crackled through gums raw and ancient, her voice muscles sticking to the sides of her throat. She drew another raspy breath. “I want to spend eternity down there.” She turned her head on the hospital pillow already soiled with drool from a mouth she couldn’t quite close. Her brain had snapped, given up its ninety-year program drive, shutting down her withered body, organ by organ. We waited. Joe, Grandma’s old friend, nearly as old as she, with a leg and arm withered from a brain stroke like Grandma suffered, had become her little boy, his mind operating at half capacity. He often rolled balls down a dirt incline to watch them bounce in the river. He knew more about Grandma than anybody, but that information was no longer retrievable. Grandma Pope’s neck bones cracked as she turned again in the silent room. She stared up from her bed, her rheumy eyes blinking, then focusing, then blinking again, like some far-off signal dying out as the starship enters deep space. “Mae, put me back there.”

I pushed forward until my thighs touched her bed, where the odor of rubbing alcohol, lip mint, and fading carnations doused me with impending death. Leaning over, I locked on to Grandma’s

pupils. She didn't blink. Only the reflection of fright signaled she was still with me. "I promise," I said.

The fright faded. A sound rose from her throat and her life force gave up its shell.

"What's that man doing here?" Aunt Becky's snaky whisper hit my ear like a hot sirocco. I winced, dabbed my eyes and tried to see.

"Who is he?" I leaned across Joe who sat on my left, his tight suit and slicked hair reflecting another era. He stared straight ahead as though he knew Grandma was gone somewhere. He hadn't cried yet.

"One of the Gruman men." Aunt Becky reached for Uncle Nast's arm. She nodded toward the unfortunate Gruman. Uncle Nast gave up emotion long ago. His eyes peered through layers of skin folds at the pew across the aisle and behind us.

"Who are the Gruman's?" A childhood name buzzed around my head like an elusive mosquito.

Uncle Nast's eye folds rested too long on me. The same expression his brother, my daddy, might have used when he wanted me to know this was nothing to ask adults about. Aunt Becky saw it, too, and twitched in her black dress with a lining that rasped across cheap pantyhose. She turned her gaze to the preacher.

Grandma Pope didn't attend her own funeral intact. Her old Primitive Baptist preacher didn't like it much, saying cremation was like dying twice, that he didn't quite know how she could rise on Judgment Day from mere ashes. In a church that washed its congregations' feet and used voices for music, it made no sense to have the body absent, nor in unrecognizable form. Preacher James led the singing, then said some old words in favor of his

long-time friend, calling her a “daughter of the river,” “a solid righteous Christian,” and something of a “justice maker.”

He gazed at Mr. Gruman for a long second when he said that. Whispering mosquitoes sounded in my head again. “Now, her lovely granddaughter, Miss Maebell Pope, another daughter of the river, is going to return this brave woman to the place she loved.” The preacher nodded toward me, my cue to gently push Joe aside and go to the front. A horse-shoe wreath of carnations and river hyacinths surrounded a bronze-colored urn, what was left of Grandma Pope. I leaned forward, grasped the cool metal in both hands and held it against my chest. The preacher said one last prayer, then touched my shoulder.

I went back to Old Joe who wept now. Somewhere in the depths of his brain, a few synapses had come together with the message that Grandma Pope wouldn't be coming back, that she might even be in this metal jar. He swiped his wet eyes, then touched the urn, leaving a streak of tear across the surface.

Outside, the mosquitoes swarmed. Every once in a while, the name Gruman buzzed. I took my place beside the preacher and waited for the line of condolences. Uncle Nast stared at the circle of women, his wife nearly pawing the earth to be with them, while Grandma Pope rested in her urn behind me on the brick step. Joe drifted off toward the swamp.

“You're not really going down the river by yourself, Miss Mae?” The question followed every “so sorry” I got. I nodded, then looked to the next mourner. Quick hugs and pats on my hand, then necks stretched and eyes turned to catch a look at the dented Ford truck at the edge of the trees.

Mr. Gruman leaned against a fender, sucking a cigar. His belly hung loose over his belt now that he had placed his suit jacket on the hood of the truck. The tie rested there, too. Gruman had

almost no hair, and his scalp looked raw from hours in the sun. His face, scratched and rugged, appeared as though he had scraped beard from his face with a flint rock.

“Why is everyone looking at that man?” I said it loud this time, and the mosquitoes scattered.

One sharp-nosed woman with gray sprackled red hair, leaned close enough to my touch my cheek with her lips. “He’s not from a nice family.” Then she pecked me with a kiss and scurried to join the swarm.

“Well, if he came to my grandma’s funeral, he can’t be all that bad.” I wiped the spot where the woman’s lips had left a dab of spit.

“Watch your talk, girl.” Uncle Nast finally spoke, his mouth moving between hound-like jowls that drooped along with his happiness.