

Below

"Did it sink all of the way down?" Her right ear cupped the top of her shoulder. At least, that's how I thought she was sitting when she asked. It was her most stable state, even if it made her look like a yogi riding on a bus with her elbow buried onto the small sliver of an armrest.

She had managed (I imagined) to sit cross legged – lotus style, her rigid arm balanced upon knuckles atop the metal bench across from me. A straight line connected her ears, humorous, radius, ulna and right carpels locked at the elbow and wrist. Of course it was the inspiration for some ancient stone monument found by pale-faced explorers on a deserted island, centuries from today. Centuries later sculptors paddled back into the blue expanse of the sea. Or maybe I should whittle this pose into a piece of Apple wood.

"I dunno," I whispered. It was pretty dark and "sounded like it went all of the way down." I heard it ker-splash, gur-gl-le, then nothing: silence. "Where else but down? Can you see anything? I think they're State Patrol, maybe sheriffs...not the rangers or the DNR...or the *Federales*."

The tips of my pinky fingers were tingling. The start of pins and needles. I dunno, maybe they were just pressed against the steel lining of the paddy wagon. But they were cold and awkward. In the abyss, I heard a faint scratch amid the muffle of car engines, light traffic and cop-radio squawk.

In my mind, she had pulled her left wrist up by arching her back and rolling her shoulder all of the way to the top of the socket. She looked (in the dark) as if she had a very tiny telephone pressed against her ear.

"I'm sure it sank." I cooed with braggadocios—comforting confidence—an offering. And it did, at that very moment, sink all of the way down. I, of course, had no idea that it had sunk down into the muck, where nothing would ever find it. Now it was beneath the prehistoric bull-heads and bacterial sludge. It sank all of the way down to rocks that had not seen the sun since the glaciers. I breathed deeply.

In the dark, I heard her do the same.

There were two quick raps at the back door of the portable jail. The doors swung open and I counted. Four headlight carved two luminous planes in the road dust. A cop car's spot light was shining from the driver's side window, aimed directly at us. Two flashlights with squawking voices inside a red and blue discotheque; amid the fireflies and twinkling stars; beneath the royal eyes of Venus. In view of the plotting eyes of Mars.

"Do you know why we pulled you over this evening?" It was the left flashlight. We all waited in the lights and crickets and distant, rumbling truck somewhere on County W.

Then I cracked. I always crack, "We're in the park after dusk..." I cleared my throat and spoke a little louder, feigning confidence out of habit. "...but this is a state forest and you're all county sheriffs..." I was solving the problem on the board as the class watched on "...so I guess its a road violation or some type of complaint..."

"My park sticker is legit. No tent or campfire. Not skinny dipping. Hell, we're both fully clothed." I winked into the blinding light. "We're locals. NHS, FFA and all sorts of other acronyms at Merrill High. We've got no warrants. We're good kids. Leave us be." I was grateful when the left flashlight aborted my nervous soliloquy.

"Before turning onto County Highway W from Forest Road 2878, you failed to signal at a stop. We followed you through Phillips while waiting for backup. Three left turns, three violations. Four, if I count the failure to yield to the Chevy west of town. Yer lucky day, I guess."

"The S-10 pullin' a Ranger? One of those high octane sparkle rigs? I hear they plane out un a second and a half..." I was nervous and excited, a dangerous combination. "...and when you're ready to fish there isn't an anchor. You just flip a switch and two stainless steel harpoons shoot out the bottom and anchor the boat on some treble feet.

"You must be a local." This time it was the right flashlight, a younger and less authoritative voice. "The Municipal Water Patrol has one of those Rangers. Harpoon anchors and twin 260 Mercury outboards. They took the Sheriff out last weekend. Nearly broke his neck when he caught an edge on the slalom. Its a serious machine..." Our papers materialized from a gloved hand in the lights. So did one ticket, in my name, for \$159.43. My lucky day, I guess.

The right light continued, "...they usually troll about the shallow section dog-leg around the back side of the small bay—where those pilings are—for smallies. The corpse porthole and a pair of UV sunglasses is better than any sonar fish-finder you find at Cabela's or Gander Mountain."

"Glass bottom?" I imagined the Dells. Overweight Wisconsinites in ankle high athletic socks and fanny packs. We stood atop a gigantic inner tube, rigged to dangle up to five pale mid-westerners, their souvenirs and fried cheese above thin algae coated pane.

We bobbed above a pail of disturbed freshwater fish for two bits a gander. Those poor fish, forever looking up shorts and sun dresses from their above ground hell, choking on hand fulls of corn tossed into the water by well meaning—but ill-informed—patrons.

"Well, some kind of polymer, there's a YouTube from down south. These County Boys find an old nasty body..." the right light unconsciously lowered his voice a half octave, "...human body. Got dug up when they were dredging up the White River by Indianapolis."

The other light wasn't content to let his partner finish the story. In a loud, declarative voice he began the epilogue. "When they were digging, they knocked up this bloated old corpse which just bob around in the river. Not a whole lot of current in the White River. The current that did take the body just swirled it around in a river bend.

County Boys say, "No go, send in the boat." Which they do.

I nodded politely.

"They load up the boat with half a S.W.A.T. Team, some landing nets, garbage bags and a cooler full of beers. One of the deputies has his camera phone out for the whole thing. Then..." [THUD] the disembodied light stomped the tailgate of the van. "They drove right through the sonuvabitch. Right through the pieces of swill and rot and putrid insides. Then they churned it up worse by circlin' round, trying to collect the bigger chunks with the nets. That's when the smell starts to hit them one by one and they start keeling overboard to puke in the water.

"That's when they shut off the camera. IAB said it was the first smart thing they did. But what I heard is there was one big chunk of chest floating around, still connected to the legs and spine and top of one arm. The clothes hadn't totally disintegrated. It was a Ranger boat just like the one you cut off except for the harpoons and corpse porthole."

I turned away from the lights. I needed to let my pupils stretch open for a moment. I looked towards her in clear light for the first time since we were thrown into the dark box, nearly an hour ago. There were a few thin wisps of hair sticking to the corner of one eye, following a moist trail that dripped off somewhere in the middle of her jaw. A thick pouted lip and squinted, accusatory, fanatical eyes.

Her aura was outlined in reds and blues from the cop cars. And from a million other sources. The fireflies. Beautiful Venus and Violent Mars.

In the light I could see her eyes. She and I were sandy and dry, walking nearly 100 kilometers south of Tunis. We were due to hit the Libyan checkpoint in a few hours. I've never gotten used to the desert sun. I blinked and squinted like a newborn animal.

She was wrapped in white linen except for her eyes. She never wore sunglasses, even in the desert.

"I want you to know when I've been drinking so you can hide the sheesha," she was hilarious.

I could see the swaddled almonds, blown with a translucent green dust. It was a hue that I could only seldom glimpse. Now I saw the emerald shadow around her eyes.

We walked silently past the Berber merchants and their camels in silent procession. We walked past the warlord crooks with their little green books and Russian guns and American dollars. We walked all of the way to the Sphinx, "because the eye of Horus told me to, in a dream," she was always joking.

When we arrived at the half feet of the half lion, we were exhausted from weeks of walking. We sat cross-legged lotus-style at the feet of this ancient monument and offered ourselves to its wisdom.