

VOL. 2
SHORT STORY



Southern Nights

A Collection of Short Stories

By: Jay Miutz

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A note:

And the Lord spoke in dreams serene
to he, a righteous man within his years,
of mankind's folly, of wickedness,
the Earth to flood with Heaven's tears.

'From the face of the Earth I will cleanse
fowl of the air with feathered wing,
only two from each kind will I spare
neither man nor beast or creeping thing'.

'For thou art blessed, a blameless man
and secure shall be with thy kin
and with sustenance, I will provide for all
only if you will abide within'.

Higher Ground

Aldo stared despairingly down at the sink. He watched the water spin into a tight spiral as it lazily collected the hairs that had fallen into the basin of the bowl – he watched them gently swirl together, before disappearing down the drain. Jesus.

He ran his hand through his hair again, it definitely felt thick – maybe. He gripped the sink with tense hands watching strands of dark brown hair dance in the air before once again landing inside the bowl alongside their fallen comrades. He was too young for this.

Way too young – but maybe he wasn't losing it naturally, maybe it was the stress? Maybe it was the weather? Maybe it was his diet? Oh god...maybe he was sick?

The possibilities streamed through his head at a rapid pace, flooding his thoughts and overwhelming him. He couldn't tell if he was panicking or becoming clinically depressed. Each thought thumped on the frontal lobe of his brain so hard it almost drowned out the pouring rain that tapped against the tin roof above him. It was easy for him to do though, having spent this long in the south, summer thunderstorms were second nature and he had come to simply see them as background noise. Tonight, however, even with his flustered state the storm's force rested in his ears and on the back of his mind.

It had been a calm week but in the last hour or so a cloak of grey, and then black, clouds had swept over the camp, eventually soaking it to the bone with thick hot rain.

Several hours had passed and the storm had not surrendered, but Aldo had bigger fish to fry – should he comb his hair? Would more come out? Or would it keep it in place?

He was iron gripping the bottom of a black comb like a convicted murderer might hold a dagger when he heard the first bell. It was nothing to raise alarm over – the camp was so spread out that it was essential to use the bells to send out simple messages.

A single bell meant vespers...which wasn't until Sunday – so he waited.

Dingggggg.

A second bell meant mealtime but it was well past that, nearly 9pm – so he waited.

Dongggggg.

Three bells, just like he thought, all that fuss just meant it was time for lights out---

Dongggggg.

Four bells.

Well maybe there was a---

Dongggggggg

Five bells.

What the hell did five bells mean? One meant vespers, two meant dinner, three meant lights out, four meant something he couldn't quite recall and five meant...five meant...five meant –

All hands on deck.

All Hands on Deck

He dropped the comb onto the concrete floor and bolted to the door at the back of the wash house. As he threw it open the soft pitter patter of the roof above was replaced by a tidal wave of noise as sheets of water descended from the sky and hit the ground like gun shots. He could barely hear anything over the sound of water slapping against branches, leaves, rooftops and the ground below. But the noise was broken for a moment as once again the bell rang out in five hard drums; it carried over the clouds, through the clamoring chaos and across the camp.

Five bells.

Without hesitation Aldo took a broad step out of the bathhouse and into the growing darkness of the night. Almost immediately he felt the weight of the rain on his frame as every inch of him inflated with water, his clothes soaking it up like a sponge. He had thrown his heavy red rain coat on but it didn't seem to be making any difference – with each second the water seeped deeper, with each step his feet sunk further into the mud, and with each thunderous clap from above the sky got darker.

He schlepped threw the narrow pass, splattering mud with heavy and soaked steps – pushing his way through the creeping darkness to an indeterminate destination. Above him the sky was ceaseless in its pursuit to drench every square inch of wilderness as bucket after bucket of water fell from the sky and began to pool, higher and higher, filling his footprints, swelling the puddles and slowly gathering momentum around him. Three minutes of blind forward motion had seemed fruitless as the bells rang in the background but then he saw it – the rusted red F-150 he had parked outside the quartermaster's cabin several hours ago.

He raced toward it, shoving a dripping wet hand into an equally damp pocket and pulling out a large ring of keys. His feet kept moving, his mind racing – what could be wrong? What was the

emergency? Was it a camper, a staffer, a whole group? Where was everyone?

He didn't have time to think it over for too long – he'd reached the truck, fumbling with the keys he heard something behind him but it was obscured by a thunderous clap above him. He shuffled through the keys, no, no, no, no...bingo, it clicked into place. Just as soon as he heard the lock spring open he felt a tug at his shoulder – he spun on the soft muddy gravel below him and was met with the sopping wet faces of his fellow staffers.

Hankins had on a yellow slicker with a large tear on the sleeve that rendered it more or less ineffective, he was holding two huge flood lights and a buck knife – he had prepared for several scenarios – or at least two: darkness and a small animal attack. Ludlow was a little better off – his green rain coat was free of any holes or tears, and his bucket hat was doing its best to keep the waves of rain from his face but a sopping and sagging wet beard was evidence that it was beginning to lose that fight. He had a small bag hung over his shoulders that was most likely soaked but if it was worth carrying through the storm, Aldo assumed it must be important.

Ludlow leaned in, keeping his hand on Aldo shoulder and practically shouting to overcome the sheer noise of the rain and thunder – even standing a few inches away his voice seemed almost washed out.

“Glad we found you – heard the bells and started running – just came up from Admin, orders are to head to the waterfront!” Aldo seemed puzzled, “The waterfront? That's the last god damn place I want to be right now!” He ran a wet hand over an equally wet face, fleetlessly wiping water away.

Hankins pointed to the truck, all three men slowly fading into pitch black, “Top brass says there's a couple boys stuck down that way, we gotta go fish'em out – storm must have caught them off guard! Water staff called it in 20 or 30 minutes ago.”

“Jesus.” Aldo, pushed the boys aside and swung open the truck door, clumsily throwing himself in and jamming the keys in the ignition.

“Let’s get a move on then – storms not slowing down anytime soon. Lights are still shot though – “ he glanced down at the front end of the well-worn vehicle, “Hop in the back and help me out.”

Hankins and Ludlow nodded their heads, scrambling over the wheel well and into the back of the truck. From the rear window just their soaked pant legs were visible.

A quick double thud came from the roof of the cab – Aldo fired up the engine and let the truck lurch forward. There was no rumble of engine, or crunch of gravel – only the deafening beating of rain against the aluminum of the truck. Aldo drove blindly at first – out of what he hoped was the quartermaster path and onto the main road – into absolute darkness as the clouds swallowed up the sky. Thirty seconds into darkness, 45 seconds, a minute the truck moved forward gaining momentum as Aldo’s heart tried to leap out of his chest.

Slowly a dim light came overhead, then another – Ludlow and Hankins had finally gotten the lanterns working. The truck hadn’t had headlights for damn near a year now – both had been busted out when they’d tried to get the septic tank upright two springs ago and the chain snapped. Admittedly the truck was missing more than it had – no headlights, a bad steering column, a Frankenstein of an engine, a rotted interior and as Aldo was realizing in the moment – a single windshield wiper. It whipped furiously, and fruitlessly, across the windshield clearing off the running water.

Even with its cosmetic – deficiencies- the old brute still ran like an American made tank, and that’s all that mattered, for all the rest they’d found work arounds.

The lights grew brighter and to all three boys relief it revealed that they had been able to navigate their way onto the road without incident. There was no time to dwell on the victory though – time was fleeting. Fifteen or so minutes had passed since the first bell and no one was quite sure what state the waterfront was in.

Aldo pressed his foot to the pedal until it hit the floor.

They shot forward, the beams of light bouncing up and down as Aldo did his best to keep the truck on the path, at full speed and from fishtailing. Each slick patch felt like a gamble, every drum of thunder sounded like a taunting laugh, and every passing second left a sickening feeling in Aldo's stomach.

Ahead, through a silver screen of rain he could make out a bent wooden sign with indistinguishable writing on it – but he knew what moves to make. He knew these roads, he knew this camp, he knew this truck – and he knew how quickly things tended to go wrong. But again, there was no time to think about any of that, only what was ahead. He hooked a hard left, then a hard right seeing the legs in the window behind him struggle for balance – one light disappeared, he heard a loud thud from back by the tailgate and then a moment later it reappeared.

They were on a straight shot now, a steady incline that would cap off shortly. He focused ahead but only on what was yards and yards ahead – bam they hit a hole- bam, bam, another and another – each time the truck sank like a broken ship and then bounced back up on its springs.

He felt himself leave the seat then return, then leave then return. He wondered how the boys in the back were doing; he wondered how much further, he wondered what the hell was going on.

The front windshield was fogging up as his panic caused his body temperature, and resultantly the cab temperature to rise. Visibility was as close to zero without being zero as possible, the

rain painted the glass from the outside, joined by a growing layer of plastered on leaves – inside the fog was rapidly spreading across the entire glass surface, a thin veil of grey.

He had no choice – he reached past his waist and rolled the window down to the halfway mark. As soon as it was cracked nature roared into the cab – angry with wind, water and cold. His ears felt torn apart, the truck seemed off balance but he had no other option. He had to even it out – the wind was pulling left. He reached out desperately to the other side – his fingertips barely scraped the window lever.

Damn.

With one white knuckled hand on the wheel he lunged right, felt the knob with his two longest fingers – he gave it a weak turn, and another and another. The pressure was gone, the balance was gone, he sat up, the wheel pulled, the truck swerved – a tree appeared in front. A small pine, he swerved again, he missed it – for the most part. With a dull ping the left side-view mirror flew behind them into the distance.

He didn't need it.

With eyes glued forward Aldo watched the road, Hankins's head popped in through the open window to his right – he didn't break focus.

“Jesus, Aldo – you all right in here?”

Aldo shouted back, still watching what he could see of the road, “Not exactly the parkway out here tonight! Tell Ludlow to hold onto something back there – when we break the tree line, cut the lights! It'll be too bright off the rain.”

“Roger that.”

They were on a downhill tear now, flying over the mud, cutting through the rain. Aldo knew that the thick surrounding woods

accounted for most of the darkness that was engulfing them and was hoping when they came out to the clearing things would be easier – they could cut the lights and see better. The pedal hadn't left the floor yet as they met the end of the hill and sprayed through an enormous puddle – the truck lifted but the sheer momentum shot them through the trench. They broke the tree line, the lights vanished as two sets of hands appear on either sides of the window frames, desperately holding on as they sped forward.

A voice yelled out from behind, “FENCE. DON'T FORGET THE FENCE.”

There was no time.

They needed to be on the other side and the only vehicle entrance was a mile downstream but even before that accurate justification could cross through his mind Aldo plowed into the birch wood fence that marked their arrival at the waterfront. The bottom rung shattered into an imaginably uncountable number of pieces as the top beam was launched off its sockets, split into three and the chunks topple off to either side of the truck. Aldo's eyes broke for the first time from his forward path as he watched the pieces scatter – the impact was sudden, harsh and effective. He eased let his foot off the gas and instead began to firmly press on the brake.

He felt the truck continue forward – sliding. He pumped the pedal, again, again, again – every inch felt like a mile until finally the break clicked and the freight train was brought to a grinding halt.

He wiped the sweat and rain from his face, and left the cab for the chaotic scene outside.

Drenched

“Quit the entrance Aldo!”

Hayworth was stooped next to the front wheel of the truck, he tugged at a large splinter of wood lodged under the well, finally yanking it free and then tossing it aside.

“Bout’ damn time you shits got here!” He was shouting through cupped hands now, the water ricocheting off his bear arms, a drenched and sagging tank top barley covering his otherwise soaking wet body. His naked feet sunk into the sandy muddy mixture below them and the rest of the lifeguards slowly made their way over looking for direction.

Aldo leaned toward Hayworth, “Got here as fast as I could, whats the word – they didn’t tell us shit.”

Sucking in breath and water Hayworth shouted out the explanation, “We got a couple of boys out there, must have missed them in the count, they took a row boat out to Eddley Island just across the way, started to paddle home when the rain picked up must’ve gotten tired. They pulled off on Elk, maybe a hundred yards directly across the shore from here, thought they’d wait out the storm.”

“And?” Aldo didn’t see the issue, if anything the problem seem to solve itself.

“This rivers growing by the second, ya’ dumb son of a bitch!” Hayworth sounded horse as he ran his hands through his sopping wet hair, “there wont be no Elk Island come sun up! We need those boys shoreside, A-S-A-P.”

The gravity of the situation was only building as the group came together, huddled on a shoreline that was rapidly disappearing.

Hayworth addressed the crowd holding up to fingers in the near darkness, “ We got two, TWO, boys stuck the fuck out there! And I need them the FUCK back here.”

It was short, followed by silence, and only broken by Ludlow, “So what's the plan then? We send someone out there? Have'm swim the channel with the tow rope, winch'em back? Seem's like a suicide run you ask me?” He shook his head as rain beat down on the brim of his hat.

The group seemed discouraged, quiet, with eyes cast down at the growing puddle beneath them, one member of the group stepped forward.

“I'll do it.”

It was Boggs, an animal of a man, even at his young age, he stood like a tree – a tree that had been hit with a few axe blades and had a few names carved into it. He had had a large tattoo across his chest bearing his birth name and date. It was expansive and intimidating, but it didn’t conceal the strength that was locked in that sinew and muscle.

As the other ran to get the need supplies Boggs peeled off his soaked shirt, tossed aside his shoes and quick looped a rope around his waist. His scared and battered body was barely visible in the ever growing dark as rain continued to pummel all the figures gathered on the receding shoreline. Even as a shadow though, Boggs was a mighty figure and Aldo was confident he could make the crossing, secure the boat and finish this saga.

As he pondered it further though, he realized he had to believe Boggs was capable – because it was their only option.

Aldo retreated from his thoughts and instead sprinted over to the truck, he squinted hard in the darkness at the winch, everything seemed in order – the plan was far-fetched but not impossible.

Wheels were in motion and everything was moving at a bullet pace. Hankins and Ludlow were once again clamoring into the truck, this time scrambling on top of the cab gaining the highest vantage point they could. From inside the cab Aldo could hear their weight slowly denting the aluminum frame, each movement created a dull thud over head as they sunk into the roof. He ran his hands over the dash, feeling each knob in the almost pitch black – wipers, defunct lights, volume and...bingo.

He pressed the button and watched a faint light appear beside a lever near his feet.

He grasped it tightly with his hand and pulled it firmly back, it resisted, but eventually followed his lead and from outside the truck you could hear a low rumble over the rain followed by a loud timely creaking.

He rolled down the window to give direction, a large waive of watery pellets beating on his face, joining the rest of the moisture continuously soaking his body.

He cupped his hands as the thunder rolled over his voice, “ROLL IT OUT! RUN IT UP SHORE – SEND HIM OUT.”

A shadowy figure dove in front of the truck, retrieving what looked like a simple black line from the darkness and then took off without hesitation down the fading shore – the line slapping the water at his heels.

“I NEED EYES!”

Aldo slapped the door of the truck with a hard bang, and seconds later two hard beams shot down the shoreline and way in the distance the blurry outline of three figures could be seen. Aldo assumed they would rig Boggs' waist with a loose coil of rope, as well as some slack line he would let out along the way. He'd jump in a hundred yards up and god willing it'd give him enough time to cut the current and get across stream – he didn't have to fight it, just cut it.

It was gamble.

The whole thing was and Aldo knew it as he muttered weak reassurances under his breath and nervously ran his fingers through his dripping wet hair.

A Plan In Action

From within the truck he felt like nothing more than a spectator – even just a few yards away he felt absolutely absent. If by some chance Boggs made the channel so much else could go wrong, the hook could break off the tow line, the slack of the line could pull Boggs off, hell the line may not be long enough to even begin with.

There was nothing he could do in the fleetingly vital seconds to improve any of their odds, and the weight of that mental compromise was crushing.

He watched the three men – they cautiously waded out into the rapidly moving waters, to what had once been shoreline and was now nothing more than a vast river of violent current. The boys above kept a steady bead of light on them, but the rain was ceaseless and even with two flashlights the exercise almost seemed fruitless.

They waded further.

Get in already, Aldo thought selfishly, the time was slipping away from them, like the sand beneath the tires.

He could hear the whooshing of water against the bumper, in between the waves of rainwater – and then suddenly one of the figures disappeared.

Aldo's eyes darted across the horizon – but there was nothing. Darkness, blackness, nothingness. The night was utterly desolate with the exception of the rain, pouring downward, blocking his view, their view -

But where?

"THERE!"

The call came from the pitch black – Aldo lifted himself out of

the seat, rolling down the window and clinging to the door frame for a better view.

He looked up the shoreline but saw nothing. He let his eyes wander down river, quickly darting back and forth across the shimmering black water. They burned as he struggled to keep them open, rain pelting his face and mixing with the sweat from his hair. Then he saw it, well past the truck, more than three-quarters across the stream a faint splash – another and then another.

If it had been any darker, it could have simply been a branch being ripped down stream but as it struggled into the air and disappeared again and again Aldo knew it was Boggs.

What felt like an eternity later the odd splashing had ceased and the flood lights now focused their attention on a stooped figure struggling to get its footing and staggering toward a shoreline. The arch of Boggs's back was barely visible as it made slow progress out of the water – Aldo could only assume the journey had been exhaustive and the last few treading steps were a fight against a charging current. The figure stumbled, lost its balance, twice the shadow disappeared from the beams and fell into the water – resurfacing a few paces away. Finally, as the blood rushed to Aldo's head from holding his breath, Boggs seemed to reach the shore.

Hankins and Ludlow kept the lights steady on his trail as he sprinted back up stream, along the shore, towing the line – doubling back to avoid the many branches, debris and broken remnants that seemed to be coming from upriver. In moments he had reached the abandoned rowboat and collected the two campers who had raised all the commotion – from squinted eyes in the pouring rain Aldo watched.

Even with Boggs safe on the shore, the boat being hooked and secured he couldn't help but harbor a looming sense of helplessness. All he could do was look on, fight off the rain and keep a tight finger hovering over the button for the winch.

He felt frozen.

Waiting for the call, waiting for the moment, the move the end of it all and dreading the moment they re-entered the rushing current. But when it had finally come, Aldo, and the whole group seemed unprepared. The backs of his eyes burned, but so did the fronts, the strain of squinting through what felt like sheer blackness mixed with the constant flow of water down his face broken up only by his nose and lips.

The spotlights seemed to sway as Boggs and the two boys floated in and out of their light but never being more than a silhouette. It was hard to distinguish all that was taking place from such a distance.

A million thoughts were flooding into Aldo's head again, as his eyes continued to beg for relief. Finally he broke, clenching them shut, rubbing them furiously and facing the ground to cast off the rain. When he reopened them they were hardly better, but now, even in their weakened state they were quickly capturing the situation.

What was happening across the shore was a darkened mystery, but it was clear what was taking place beneath the truck. It was slowly being consumed by the jet-black water of a swelling river. He hopped out to gauge the situation. It was nearly ankle deep – he'd been so distracted he hadn't noticed it, and now it was slowly seeping into his socks. He felt the souls of his feet slowly sinking into the new mud, and as he looked toward the truck his stomach began to sink as well.

Water was rippling against the tires, already built up over the lip. Beneath it was almost a guarantee that the ground had begun to be carried away – soon the tires might be stuck, the whole truck might be stuck – but that wasn't the issue – soon it might very well be swept away.

He felt like his head had been down for an eternity – gauging the situation, weighing his options, analyzing every detail but it

was more likely only a few seconds.

His head snapped back as thunder moaned across the night. The rushing water, the groaning clouds and the slap of the rain against every surface rang between his ears as he pulled one foot from the mud and then a second. He felt his boots pulling away as he fought to raise his knees, the first one slowly emerged and the second came quicker. A short struggle, a broad step and he grasped almost blindly for the truck's shallow door handle. It was slick in his palm but he managed to open it and climb back in, pulling his body onto the seat while his drenched clothing clung to everything it touched.

He didn't check to see if Boggs had hit the water yet, he didn't even consider it – he slammed the same small button as before and felt the winch squeal into gear. A hum came from the front of the cab, dull and low - it was working. He rolled onto his back, smearing the mud from his feet across the door and the dash and then clumsily sitting up and finding his footing on the pedals. The rain poured in through the open door, pelting his left side while his hand reached for the steering column. He slammed it into reverse. The truck rocked back...then forward...he pressed down a little more...back again...then forward but this time it felt like he was sliding off course.

He knew he needed to slow it down – but there was no time.

He cranked the wheel, the tires howled under the weight as they pushed against the mud and rocks. Then he pushed the pedal a final time – all the way to the floor. The truck shot back, jerking into a violent angle as the wheel kicked back in his damp hands. He gripped it tighter, fought it back into position, a low thump from the tailgate, but no time to react – the truck pushed back and back and back – and then it hit its patch. It shot full gear into reverse.

Aldo had no way of knowing just how far back he had to go. It felt like he had gone a good 100 yards in just a few seconds, he jammed the column back in park and reached under the seat for

the brake. It locked in place and once again he pulled himself from the cab.

Contrary to his belief the entire ordeal hadn't taken him very far but it had gotten him out of trouble – for now. He looked down at the wheels, they were sinking slowly into the soft ground but he knew that was an endless battle the important part was they were out of the water for now, he took a few breaths, closed his eyes trying to regain his...

"Jesus! Fuck."

It was muffled by the time the shouting reached his ears, having battled against the rusty clang of the winching cable, the hounding calls of rain against the truck and the ever present whooshing of the rapidly growing current.

Aldo opened his eyes back up but saw nothing, he turned on his heels feeling them sink again into mud. In the back of the truck, dimly lit by the flood lights Hankins was still standing watch over the entire situation as Ludlow struggled to regain his footing and find his spotlight. Aldo had forgotten their position in all the commotion.

In the soft back light of the lantern Hankins looked pale as a ghost, his hair jet black and slicked against his forehead – eyes squinted and arms raised, "They're stuck! They're stuck!" Aldo climbed on top of the wheel well – clinging to Hankins shoulder looking down the beam of light.

"There."

In the distance the metal of the rowboat sporadically reflected off the spotlights, a black cut out against a dark background. They had made it from the island, both boys and Boggs, but with no control over their direction the winch had pulled them right toward a pile of debris. Sticks, logs and leaves mounded up around them as the winch growled and hissed, fighting against the resistance. At first no one moved – they just watched.

Could it pull them over the rubble?

The light source got stronger as Ludlow found his footing and steadied his arm. Now Aldo could see the true gravity of the situation. Two terrified boys were huddled in the front of the small, rusting rowboat – with life jackets sloppily strapped on. They were crouched down, hardly visible over the branches and debris. Directly behind them was Boggs, he was stooped over voicelessly shouting out commands. His body seemed rigid, two hands gripping the chunnels of the boat – desperately trying to use his weight to dislodge them. He shifted left, and then threw his body weight to his right leg.

Nothing.

Aldo watched, as the figures seemed to do their best not to look towards the shore, to acknowledge the light or the people watching helplessly from so far away. Then, in an instance, the winch gave another fruitless squeal – the boat shifted, Boggs shifted, the boys clung on as everything slowly regained movement. The back right corner of the boat dipped into the water, and like a pool of tar it slow began to devour it. The small vessel shifted, as it was slowly submerged, Boggs was in up to his knees, grabbing onto sticks from the pile.

They broke like pine straws in his hands. He pushed the boys forward until they were nearly out of the boat, he stood close behind them as water flooded to the first, and then second seat. The first boy was barley in the boat at this point, gripping the metal edge he kept one foot on the bow and another precariously balanced against a large chunk of tree.

Boggs seemed to continue ushering them forward, then he climbed over the second boy, all the while followed by the light – soon he seemed to be lowering himself into the water. Lightning cracked against the sky and for a millisecond everything was illuminated as Boggs dropped into the water. With one arm hooked over the taught cable on the boat he used the other to grabbed onto the first boy.

A splash.

It all clicked in Aldo's mind.

He released the iron grip he had placed on Hankins shoulder and shouted into his ear, "Make your way down shore, keep a bead on Boggs!" He turned, blinded by the light behind him, "Ludlow, follow behind! Keep a tight light on that boat – I'll meet you there!"

The boys stiffly leapt from the truck bed onto the muddy ground doing their best not to break their steadfast spotlights. As they sprinted off, Aldo found himself plunged into true darkness, he dropped from the wheel well, slipping in the mud. He got his footing and used one hand to run up the side of the truck, pellets of rain splattering off its edges. The door was still open, he reached in, almost stunned by the absence of rain on his face and the clarity of his vision. For a third time he clicked the button on the dash and in an instance the hissing, howling, groaning and creaking of the winch disappeared.

The rain remained, as did the thunder.

He turned and in the distance saw two faint lights slowly moving down shore.

Without hesitation he ran to them. It felt slow, like he was moving at half a pace, dragging some enormous weight behind him. His feet pushed against objects that seemed to melt away, he fell, got back up, fell again and soon found himself hunched over using his arms and legs all at once to get momentum. By the time he had reached the group the shoreline had long faded away and now he found himself shin deep in swift water.

As he stood with the others he could feel the leaves and twigs and random bits of debris bumping into his legs as they were slowly swept away. The group was dead silent in the chaos of the night. They stood in the water, several yards down river from where Boggs had first dove in. The wire that ran between them

cut at an odd angle and the faint shadow of three slowly moving figures could barely be seen even with the lights shining right at them.

Boggs and the boys seemed to be crawling towards them, the pace was painfully slow as one boy nervously place one hand in front of the other, prodded along by Boggs, and followed behind by the other. It continued again and again as they drew closer and closer to the beams of the lanterns, but remained so many yards away.

Who Shall I Send?

From the shore the group slowly edged further into the rushing waters leaving behind the shin deep safety of the shore and now pushing towards the knee deep portion of the river. Afraid to go any further they huddled around the wire watching, hopelessly, helplessly and attentively.

Aldo looked down at his legs, feeling the water clip at the bottoms of his thigh. It was a continuous black mass that seem to be running at an ever increasing pace, no bottom in sight, no end in sight, just an endless barrage of swirling, whirling, and pushing water. Its slick looking surface was broken only by the ripples made by the barrage of rain drops falling from the sky like bullets.

Entranced in it all he suddenly felt a sharp force beside his leg. Before he could put it all together what was happening the force had grown strong – the wire. The truck down the line had begun to shift and now the wire was being pulled along with it – the anchored row boat was doing all it could to hold it in place.

And then, in a second, Aldo felt himself swept off his feet - landing hard on his hand, another body toppling over his. He struggled to plant himself or get his bearing, feeling himself begin to be dragged away. He panicked for a moment as he felt water rush over his face, he choked down a cough and got on his feet. His clothing, already soaked under his raincoat was now completely saturated and seemed to be dragging him down.

He and Ludlow had been quickly pushed aside by the sheer force of the water and now found themselves a good distance from the group. Aldo began to move forward in an odd and somewhat ineffective half-walk, half swim, half tred. Pushing forward toward the shape of the others – the wire seemed nowhere to be found as he moved forward.

His heart raced as each broad step made a large splash and

little progress – his arms desperately pushing the water aside, throwing himself forward. He was out of breath but every inhale came with a mouthful of rain and river water, it trickled down his chin. Now just a few more steps away the huddle of young men had tightened, supporting one another and working there way cautiously further out into the bulk of the current along the wire to meet Boggs – his silhouette seemed just a few yards out.

"Link up! Link up" water sprayed from Aldo lips as he barked the orders at the others.

They looped arms and squatted down, Haywood took the lead. Further and further, Aldo felt the force of the others further up the chain pulling on him as his chest stretched to its full potential, his arms locked to his hips and his teeth clenched.

His shoulders felt as though they might explode from their sockets until, suddenly, he was shoved back, failing to maintain his balance. He felt a hand grabbing his shoulder, Hayword, clawing his way down the line with Boggs' head locked in his arm, Boggs himself still weakly clutching a small shaken boy in a bright orange life vest.

"We lost one!" Hayward's voice was panicked, his mind struggling to give direction has he handed off the young boy and attempted to stand an exhausted Boggs on his own. "God damnit, he still on the..."

Aldo moved without thought, without consequence, without concern or hesitation. Each step seemed to take place in slow motion as he slipped his arm from the now broken chain and lunged forward. Another step – he tore off his raincoat then pulled off his shirt, the cold rain stinging like a million needles on his chest and back. A final step he left the group behind and dove head first into the dark, rushing, panicked waters ahead of him.

Beneath the Current

He kept one hand as far out ahead of him as possible. What the hell was he doing? What the hell was he thinking?

No. He knew exactly what he was thinking: Boggs was spent, drained of every last ounce of energy – and Aldo was tired of giving directions from the shoreline.

The rapid current twisted his body like a sheet in the wind for the mere fraction of a second that he was submerged. Suddenly he felt a sharp sting on his side as he feet where whipped back and forth, it was getting worse – the wire. He reached out his hands, feeling a great force resisting them but managed to grab the now submerged cable with both. It vibrated as water slipped over and under it, trying with all its might to break through it.

He leveled his body since swimming seemed useless. With each kick his legs were snapped to the side, his ankles painfully collided and his knees twisting in pain. He pulled himself along the wire, submerging his head as he moved forward. Each time it was as if some great beast was swallowing him – the cold water completely enveloping him. Forward, forward, forward – as soon as one hand left the wire the water pushed with all its might. Two hands back on, one back off, exhaustively repeated.

The boy was close; Aldo could see his outline just a yard or so off as he lifted his head from the water a 5th, 6th and 7th time. When he did finally reach him he was shaking so much Aldo didn't know how he had managed to hold on for so long. There was no time to calm him down, the night and the water had gotten colder, the once tame creek was now a raging river and the current seemed to have no plans for stopping.

Now what?

Aldo wrapped an arm under the boys shoulder and around his back – he couldn't have been older than 8 or 9, small, tired, afraid. With one hand Aldo gripped the cable as tight as he

could and began to position them to return, it was no easy feat however the little boys hands seemed unable to release his hold.

"You've gotta let go!" Aldo shouted, a splash of water muddling his words, "You've got to let go!"

He tugged on the boy's body in a last attempt to move them both forward. It was slow, very slow as he pulled himself along little by little. Together their mass was an obstacle the water refused to let by, they were being pushed and rolled and twisted as they did their best to both move forward and clutch onto the now completely submerged cable.

Aldo shifted to his side, half his face now remaining constantly submerged but keeping the little boy above the water line. With one arm he squeezed the boy as tight as possible, wrapping around his waist and grabbing the wire as best he could with his hand. He kept the other arm stretched as far forward as possible – pulling them along inch by inch. The boy clung with both hands on Aldo's shoulder, his small fingers digging in like pegs into Aldo's skin.

But they were moving.

There was no way of knowing exactly how far away the shore was, or if it still existed. From a faint light not too far off Aldo could tell he was heading toward the group, but the exact distance was lost in the darkness. What he did know was that they were moving.

Hand over hand- his heart was racing, his whole body felt numb – his legs and feet awkwardly switched between powerful kicks and weak treads. Both futile. His eyes burned as the water flowed over his almost entirely submerged face, breathing heavily through the side of his mouth.

He ignored all of it, pushing forward, all of it except the now searing pain of what felt like nails being dragged down his right

arm and back. It was an agonizing pain that seemed to be growing – the boys hands slipping from there grip as the rush of the water now threatened to tear him from Aldo's grasp.

The pain reached its climax as the boys hold was compromised. Suddenly Aldo felt the breath be ripped from his lungs, his face plunged into the total blackness of the water now.

A small arm wrapped around his neck, tight like a noose another joined it seconds later. Aldo couldn't see, couldn't breath - he felt his chest screaming as he held the cable. He released the boy instinctively letting his other arm fly forward so both his hands held firm to the tow line. He pulled himself desperately up.

His head broke the surface like an explosion, as the current splashed back at him. He inhaled, and it felt as though he had gotten no air at all. A pinhole was all he could feel. He moved forward without thinking again using any strength he could to draw even the faintest hint of air. The boys legs now wrapped around his waist, he was being choked by every element of everything. The weight on his back seemed to drag him under. Again he found himself below the rush of the water, again he pulled himself up and along. Then below again this time dizzy without air and again he cleared the surface – wheezing as he sucked in a single shallow breath.

And then again he was under.

But this time he did not break the surface, his head remained under – he pulled up and forward, kicking, stretching, dragging but he still remained submerged. The boys arms were getting tighter – there was no chance of taking a breath now.

What he wouldn't give for even the faintest hint of oxygen. His face was burning hot, even in the chilly water. His cheeks felt as though they were pin cushions stabbed again and again. From the back of his head came a piercing hot pain that stabbed at his eyes as they screamed forward trying to escape there sockets.

He opened his mouth feeling the water rush in and hearing the bubbles pulse outward.

Beyond the clamp around his neck, the blood and oxygen seemed to have abandoned his lower body. His heart felt like it had only beat once in a millennium, inside a chest that was burning like an untamed wildfire. The pressure on his torso was building but there was nothing to feed it and nowhere for it to escape to. His eyes, already useless underwater, seemed to grow even darker.

He was sinking lower.

Now the iron grip around his esophagus began to loosen, one arm released – instinctively Aldo inhaled but all he took in was cold, gritty water. Bubbles exploded from his mouth as he coughed silently into the water around him. Still holding the wire he felt a thousand miles below it, being dragged away from it while a steady tension grew from the back of his head. Pressure was building behind his eyes, it felt as if his hair was being ripped from its roots as the boys he had so foolishly attempted to rescue scrambled to grab anything he could to stay about the waterline.

He felt the pulling tension disappear, then be replaced by a searing pain, then the tension returned.

With everything he had left he pulled on the cable, and kicked hard – lurching upward toward the surface.

Then there was nothing.

Nothing left in his body – no energy, no oxygen, no feelings whatsoever. His vision felt as though it was fading away, his hands seemed a million miles away and his head twisted loosely in the flow of the current.

Almost all sensation was lost, except a faint touch from the farthest reaches of his limbs. Not his fingers, hands, arms or

anything else – but his toes, gently scraping against the rocky bottom of the once tame riverbed.

As his feet landed he felt his body take on no weight, in fact, he felt lighter – lighter than he had throughout the entire struggle. The feeling overwhelmed him as his chin sank down to meet his chest.

Silence and then – an explosion.

Aldo sucked in air like a vacuum – his whole chest heaved forward, his back tightening in spasm as he choked out hot, thick, dirty water.

He opened his eyes; still coughing too hard to catch his breath, while the heavy drive of rain barraged his face. Breathing was painful, like trying to cram a bowling ball through a garden hose. He struggled to inhale, his body began to shake so badly, and his teeth chattered so rapidly he feared they might all chip away. He felt frozen, but slowly each body part thawed out – pins and needles ran up and down his legs, his arms floated in the shallow puddle he was placed in.

Half the group now stood above him, Hayworth was kneeling down beside him, one hand still firm on Aldo's chest, "Thought we lost you – you dumb son of a bitch!" Aldo's body was in a crumple, clearly dragged from the river to the nearest place they could find. It was still dark out, and his vision was still cloudy but Aldo could make out Ludlow, and a weakened Boggs beside him watching nervously.

Aldo let his head fall to the side, both in exhaustion and an attempt to escape the constant rain from flooding his face. In the distance he saw the others, and standing beside them two smaller figures, now sitting up covered with heavy towels.

He smiled as he turned back, but was met with a searing pain across his scalp as he did so. He lifted a weak arm and ran it across the top of his head as he had a habit of doing, when he

reached the middle the pain intensified and he drew his hand back. Even in the darkness, the pouring rain and the vast commotion as he stared desperately up at his hand he could still make out the streaks of diluted blood and large clumps of dark hair.

Jesus.

And for a moment, and barely a moment, he was concerned – but as his hand fell back to his side with a soft splash of water, and felt the hair be gently swept away he couldn't help but feel that there were greater worries in this world.

He could always just buy a hat.

The End.