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Names

Early in July, after Bruce turned thirteen, his parents filed for divorce. The next day they decided he should spend several weeks with his grandparents, who lived in a wood-frame house at the edge of a tobacco field near Salt River, not far from Louisville. Bruce hardly knew them, had never been south of Boston, and didn't want to go.

But his mother said he had to, and when he asked for how long, his father said until things at home got squared away.

When Bruce stepped off the plane, a wall of heat struck him square in the face, felt like a red-hot skillet straight from the oven. His face turned crimson, sweat popped out on his brow, his neck and chest. His brand-new khakis clung to his thighs.

His grandparents picked him up in their red pickup. It was the two-door model, with tiny seats in the back of the cab. Bruce rode behind the driver's seat, legs folded into his chest.

They took the North-South Expressway toward Tennessee. Near Shepherdsville they turned off the highway and onto several side roads with potholes, then onto a gravel lane that ran along the river. Bruce caught glimpses of the water between the trees: dull brown, like stale coffee with a jot of cream. They turned onto a dirt driveway, stopped under a sweeping pecan next to a rusted-out Plymouth with flat tires that Grandmother used to drive.

They showed Bruce his bed, tucked under the rafters on the second floor. Grandmother set supper on the table.

Bruce began to think he wouldn't like Kentucky or his grandparents. Their little house had a ripe, sweet smell, akin to stale cabbage or worn out socks. The single AC unit hummed and sputtered, dripped water inside and out, barely cooled the front room. And, he didn't much like the food: fat butter beans and ham hocks, mustard greens doused with pepper sauce, white gravy spooned over biscuits. And the tea, sweet as a spool of cotton candy.

After supper, Grandfather asked if he'd like to see the river and Bruce said okay.

He followed his grandfather past a long line of tobacco plants, now cool and dark in the evening sun. They crested a low bluff, pushed through nettles and giant ragweed until they saw the river, quiet and dark, slipping through beds of water willow.

Grandfather told him to take off his shoes, roll up his pants. The old man kicked off his sandals and stepped into the water, waded over to a gravelly shoal on the far bank. Shoes off, Bruce followed, felt the mud between his toes, cool and slick. With each step, gravel cut into his heels. Water tugged at his pant legs.

Grandfather plunged his hand deep into the river, scratched about on the bottom. He grunted, then pulled out something big, black, heavy. "It's not a rock," he said, and held it up to Bruce. The shells squeezed shut, shot a stream of water straight to his forehead.

"You been peed on by a mussel," he said, poking him in the shoulder. "And, don't be writing to your Ma about that."

He dropped the mussel on the bank. "You try," he said.

Bruce stooped down, ran his fingers back and forth over the river bottom. After a few minutes he felt one, wedged in tight. He fetched it out, held it up for Grandfather to see.

"Toss it up there," he said.

Bruce threw the mussel on the bank. He stood knee-deep in the water, watched as his grandfather waded about, hands raking the bottom. Then Bruce jammed his fingers into the gravel. Wet sand backed up under his nails, bits of broken shell and sharp gravel slashed his fingertips. He found one, then another.

They stopped searching when the sun fell beneath the sycamores. He and Grandfather squatted on the bank, eyes on the mussels. There were black ones, brown ones, yellow ones, a few with green stripes. Some no bigger than a thumbnail, others larger than a dinner plate, one as fat as a softball. And, the shells: some smooth as the skin of a yellow plum, others with pustules, flutes, creases, and pockmarks. And,

a little one, fragile as an oakleaf in November. Grandfather lined them up on the sand, gave each one a name: deertoe, pigtoe, fawnsfoot, giant washboard, hickorynut, fragile papershell, giant floater, kidneyshell, butterfly.

“What will we do with them?” Bruce asked.

Grandfather shrugged. “Chunk ‘em back in,” he said.

They pitched them in the shallow water next to the shoal. Then they splashed back across, feeling their way through gravel and cobble, over algae-covered rocks. Up on the bank, Bruce pulled on his shoes. As they slid through the tobacco field toward the house, their shoulders touched.

Bruce sat on a low wooden stool next to the fireplace. The room was dark except for a dim light on a table by Grandmother. “What’d ya do?” she asked. In her left hand was a white tea cup, half filled with Evan Williams black bourbon. On the bluff behind their house, a whip-poor-will began its circular, bubbling chant.

Bruce dropped his right hand, slid it down his pants leg. The khaki was slippery, heavy with yellow-brown mud from the river. He raised his hand, palm up, inhaled the aroma of mussels, wet leaves, washed gravel. He looked up at his grandparents, felt their eyes, deep and silent, upon him. He thought about the mussels, all lined up on the riverbank.

“Can you,” he asked his grandfather, “teach me their names?”