PART ONE

The river was not yet visible in the thick darkness prior to dawn, only the moon on the water like the world turned upside down. For a quarter hour Roy Breece had been in the tree stand waiting. He watched the moon sail the water, saw Venus blink on and off as she moved through leafless branches in her climb up the eastern sky. The sun was rolling up. Roy could see his hands now, his .243 rifle cradled in his lap. As high clouds gleamed pink, Venus began to grow dimmer. The world was silent, he was far enough into the woods that even the sparse Saturday traffic from the highway was muted. The first bird twittered, one single, pure warble, and that call was answered. Within minutes the world was awake, doves began their sad cooing, a large fish broke the river surface. Roy could see into the tree limbs now, and a squirrel was climbing down a tree trunk to the ground to feed. The deer would be moving now, and if that big buck was coming, he would come in the half light before the sun crested the horizon.
Roy had not moved a muscle in several minutes. The seat in his deer stand was padded, he had placed both feet on limbs wide apart, back erect. He always wore enough clothing that he stayed warm. Deer didn’t live long enough to grow ten points by being stupid. Plenty of dumb hunters twisted and squirmed in their stands trying to get comfortable, blew breath into their cold hands, and to the ear of wildlife sounded like blowing trumpets.

A faint rustle of leaves, then silence, another few steps. Roy tensed his hands on his rifle and peered into the forest below him. More steps. Sounded like a deer, a large one. A man would make much more noise.

The buck stepped from a reed thicket into the open bank. He turned his head from side to side and searched, his nostrils flared. Roy judged the distance to be forty yards. A few saplings grew between them, but if the buck would move on down to the sandbar, nothing would stand between them but air.

The buck walked onto the sandbar, searched both ways on the river, then slowly lowered his head to drink. He was the one all right, that rack itself like a tree. Roy had spent hours scouting him during the off season, learning his trails, where he slept and came to drink. Only when he lowered his head to the water did Roy lift his rifle and peer into the sight. The buck was suddenly magnified four-fold. Roy clicked off the trigger safety, planted the cross hairs low down just back of the buck’s shoulders, then squeezed off the round.

Thunder in the forest – the shot was true enough that the buck did not even wheel. His front legs buckled, he dropped flat to his belly and his muzzle and eyes sank into the water. In the great silence following the gun, Roy clicked on the safety before even taking his eye from the scope.

Despite the massive blood loss, at the wildlife checkpoint the buck still weighed in at eleven pounds above the county record. The rack was a perfect ten points. Roy gutted the deer and buried the offal. Noon had passed, his belly
gnawed with hunger. Roy studied his watch and decided to swing by Mary’s Place for just one hour. She made the best hamburgers in Cumberland County, and a beer would sure taste good. A lot of the fellows would be there by now, too, and Roy wasn’t ashamed to admit to himself he wanted to show off. The guys sometimes kidded him about how well he prepared for and planned everything he did, but didn’t it pay off? He’d started ten years ago as a bricklayer’s helper, and now he employed a five man crew. At twenty-eight years of age, he owned his own house, loved his wife, had a three-year-old son, and hoped it was a daughter that was due to pop out in two weeks. Lying here in the bed of his truck was the carcass of the county record deer. Who would laugh last?

Mary’s Place was a squat, frame building painted white and decorated with neon beer signs. The dirt parking lot was scattered with a dozen trucks and cars. A cluster of people stood at the tailgate of one of the trucks, mostly men, a few women in tight jeans and layers of makeup. Roy knew them all by name. He’d grown up in this community, had worked for or now employed nearly everyone who came to this bar. Roy parked and got out of his truck and walked over to the group. They were looking at a young buck with a four point rack. The truck belonged to Claude Phillips, a loud-mouthed guy about Roy’s age. Roy had gone to school with him, had hired Claude twice and twice ended up letting him go. The deer hadn’t been gutted yet. Roy saw where the first bullet had struck the buck in the lower back, probably severing his spine. Another close range shot in the head had killed him.

“He made it bout a hundred yards,” Roy heard Claude say. “Strong sucker, pulling himself forward with just his front legs.”

Roy figured Claude would haul the deer around a couple of days, then throw it into a road ditch.

“Bossman,” Roy heard Claude shout. “You like my little trophy?”

“He’s a pretty one, all right,” Roy answered.
Roy saw that Claude was studying his hunting clothes, the skinning knife still suspended from his belt.

“You look like you might have been doing a little hunting yourself today,” Claude said. “Have any luck?”

Everyone looked at Roy. He wished he hadn’t stopped by now. Billy Peters, Roy’s cousin on his mother’s side, looked at Roy’s truck and saw the canvas covering the deer.

“Looks like you got something back there, Roy,” Billy said. Roy shrugged one shoulder.

“Hey, Claude,” Billy said, “bet ya a beer on the spot that what’s under that canvas is bigger than this fawn you murdered.”

Several people laughed. Billy worked for Roy, was dependable and loyal and hardworking.

Claude eyed Roy’s truck, the ample sheet of canvas. He smiled, but his smile was fake. “What you got, Bossman?”

“Bout the same as you,” Roy answered.

“Two beers,” Billy chimed in. “Two beers, shots of liquor, your choice, that Roy’s got a bigger deer under that canvas than you’ve got.”

“You’re on,” Claude answered. “Show us your kill, Bossman.”

Roy led a parade of people to the rear of his truck. When he pulled the canvas back, a collected gasp, then a round of whistles erupted. Roy couldn’t help but grin.

“County record by eleven pounds. Call Sam down at the station if you think I’m lying. I been scouting him since last summer.”

Billy slapped Roy’s back. “I wish I’d bet a case now. I know this man. He don’t underbid a job or waste bricks. Come opening day, he goes out and takes the county deer record.”


Roy grinned while listening to the praise. He glanced at Claude who was still smiling, but his eyes drawn narrow.

“Yeah, the Bossman’s tough,” Claude said. “But when you
own the company, you can afford the time off to stalk the woods. Me, I gotta work for a living and hunt when I got a few extra hours.”

Roy recalled how Claude was bad for laying out Mondays. He had often smelled whiskey on his breath following lunch break.

“Shit,” Billy said. “Yours was probably a road kill, Claude. Let’s go in. I got some free beer to drink.”

“I cover my bets,” Claude snapped. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a pint bottle of Kessler’s. He unscrewed the cap, then took a long draw. He held the bottle out to Roy.

“Have a drink, Daniel Boone.”

Roy shook his head. “Naw. I stay away from the hard stuff.” He remembered too well his father’s fondness for whiskey and the hardships that his father’s drinking had brought the family when he was growing up.

“Hell, Bossman, my whiskey ain’t good enough for you? I can’t afford Jack Daniels.”

Claude shook the bottle. Roy exhaled and took it and turned the bottom up. The whiskey burned going down and felt like fire in his empty stomach. He handed the bottle back and Claude sucked on it again. He left two fingers in the bottom.

“Finish it.”

Roy recognized the duel, but he took the bottle and drained it.

While driving home, Roy concentrated on the center line. He was way over his usual limit of four beers. The whiskey had done it – two more shots inside the bar, then round after round of beer – never did eat a hamburger. The last hour had been sort of a blur. He remembered Claude finally bringing up the subject about him getting fired, but before an argument started, Billy cold-cocked the guy. They slugged it out for a minute before Billy brought him down. The two of them
had been wanting to fight all afternoon, anyway. Roy left then, weaving between tables and out the door to his truck.

He rolled down the window and hung his head out in the freezing air. Damn deer still had to be hung up to cool out. Madge would be mad. Though he was drinner than he'd been in years, he still wanted another beer. He drove slowly the last mile, taking deep breaths and trying to clear his head.

Roy stopped outside the living room window and studied Madge sitting in the Easy Boy. She wore the calico frock with the peasant neck that he liked, her thick brown hair rounding both sides of her neck. She was singing a song to Marty, the three-year-old straddling her knees. The large book was perched atop the fullness of her belly, round and taut as a melon after eight months of pregnancy. She was beautiful, her skin holding the luster of a pearl; the boy was handsome, carried Roy's mouth and chin, Madge's blue eyes. From the backyard, he could hear his black labrador, Jock, barking. He was probably hungry.

Madge looked up at the sound of the door, smiled, but her smile was tight. The boy squealed and grinned at him but clung to her.

"Hey," Roy said, glancing at the clock. He leaned his rifle against the door jam. Then he slowly removed his coat and hat and placed them on the rack.

"I was starting to worry," she said. "I called Ruth, but she didn't know where you were."

"I'm sorry, babe. I got a buck early, then decided to stop by Mary's for a beer. I ended up staying a lot longer than I wanted to."

"I saved your supper."

"I ain't too hungry." Roy tried to steer a straight path to the kitchen. He looked in the fridge, but there was no beer. "Damn," he muttered, wishing he had stopped for more. A good fight was on HBO later that night and he would want some beer. He looked in the dog feed sack. Half full. In the
cabinet was a single can of cat food. He slid it behind a box of saltines. Then he took another sobering breath.

“We're out of cat food, and the cat is hollering,” Roy said, walking past his family. He began putting on his coat. “I'll run out and get some and be right back.”

Madge looked at him with eyes that were clear and knowing. “You don't need any more beer, honey.”

“Who said anything about beer? The damn cat is hungry.” Roy opened the door, then turned back to her. “We need anything else?”

Madge stood slowly, cradling Marty in her arms. “Roy, please don't go out again,” she said softly. “You're drinking and shouldn't be on the road.”

“And let the cat starve?”

“I'll fix the cat something. I'd rather you be with us.”

Roy stared at her, and for a moment hated lying. She was so damn pretty standing there hugging the boy, ready to burst with his second child. But as suddenly, he turned angry. Shit, all he wanted was a couple more damn beers. Sit down and watch a good fight. Any man that laid bricks fifty hours a week deserved a couple of beers.

Roy looked outside at the darkness, then back at Madge. He stepped inside. “Well, hell,” he said, grasping the knob and slamming the door violently.

The impact jolted the rifle, causing it to begin sliding down the wall. Roy stepped forward to grab it, but in his drunkenness he kicked the stock and the weapon fell toward the center of the room. Roy grabbed for the barrel but missed, the gun came down hard against the arm of an oak rocking chair.

The cartridge discharged with a roar. A bullet stinging as a wasp splattered into the center of the boy's chest and threw up fingers of blood that dotted the ceiling and wall. The lead punched through his little body, then buried deep to the right of Madge's heart. A huge, ringing silence followed the blast, the boy instantly sagged in her arms. Madge's eyes opened
wide with astonishment. She took two steps toward Roy, one arm raised pitifully. He caught her as she fell, tucked the boy under his left arm, bent slightly to wrap his free arm around her buttocks, and lifted. Somehow he opened the door and began running for the light on his neighbor's porch. The boy felt loose like one of his teddys, his blood draining down Roy's trouser leg. Madge's arms were clasped around his neck, but her grip got weaker and weaker while he kicked at Sam's door and screamed.

Roy watched the ambulance man pump hard against Marty's still chest. At the hospital, he threw up on the floor. His mother held to his arm and sobbed into her scarf. The doctor walked slowly into the room, holding the tiny girl they had cut from Madge just minutes before her heart quit. The child was blond and blue-eyed, with Roy's mouth, Madge's eyes, her brother's pug nose. Roy turned in horror and ran outside. At the funeral the preacher talked of God's will, of how we were often not meant to understand the goodness in all of his plan. Roy walked away from his words and began a two-month drunk that ended when he was carted off to Butner to the mental hospital, twenty pounds thinner and vomiting blood.

PART TWO

Roy stared through the curtainless window of his room into the gray courtyard. His room was bare except for a bed and dresser and the chair in which he sat. The first of the year had passed and snow had fallen last week, but most of it had melted now, or turned to slush. The sky was cold and blue. Roy waited to watch the black man bring out the kitchen garbage. Always the same time, give or take a few minutes, he carried out a large can full of breakfast scraps and placed it behind a trash dumpster. Probably carried it home with him to feed to hogs. The can was always heaped to overfull with
leftover gobs of grits and egg whites and scraps of toast that spilled on the ground.

The rats lived in burrows under the dumpster. In seconds their heads appeared, black eyes gleaming, their noses twitched at the smell of new food. They massed at the edge of the dumpster, about a dozen in cluster, nervously turning in circles, snapping at one another, starting and stopping and acting as if in debate. Then, as if on one particular squeal of command, they ran for the garbage can, tails lifted an inch off the ice, quick, short steps, heads nearly skimming the ground. They were upon the spilled food in seconds, grabbing and snapping and swallowing. Two of the larger rats climbed the sides of the grimy can.

Roy always saw the hawk's shadow first. He could not see the bird of prey's perch – probably a tree limb where he had a clear view of the courtyard – but the shadow was his calling card. The rats saw the shadow too, and froze, hunkered even lower to the ground and waited. The hawk swooped in, talons splayed, his wings shaped in a V, and skewered one rat. He never missed.

The other rats scattered. Jaws packed with food, they raced for the shelter of the dumpster. Their unlucky brother squealed and struggled for a few seconds as the red-tailed hawk consolidated his grip. In a few moments the rat went limp, the hawk flapped his wings and rose until only his shadow remained, winged to his perch where Roy saw in his mind the bird slowly ripping his prey.

Days in and out, one rat died in sacrifice for the spoils of food, his brethren to digest their meal in the dark, warm earth tunnels. The hawk seemed to target one rat from his perch: he might be sitting on top of the can or on the ground, but he was the chosen one – he died.

Roy heard footsteps behind him, the soft patter of gum soles.

"Mr. Breece, it time for your 'pointment," the attendant said.
Roy turned slowly to face the man. He knew the attendant would wait until he got up and walked with him to the woman’s office, and if he refused, another man would be called and they would take his arms and drag him there. Roy stood and walked out the door. He’d been there three times already, and hadn’t said a dozen words. She just rambled on like she was reading from a book.

The psychiatrist’s office was filled with a large, stacked bookcase, a desk and two stuffed chairs. Her Duke University diploma hung on the wall. Roy took his chair and stared at the floor. The psychiatrist looked to be only months out of school, wore glasses and loose sweaters, but probably looked good at home in tight jeans and a T-shirt and a beer in her hand. She opened Roy’s chart and scribbled something.

“Roy, is there anything you’d like to talk about today in particular? Why don’t you tell me what you’ve been thinking about since last week.”

Roy stretched out his legs. He thought about the rats he’d seen devoured each morning. He looked up sharply for the first time into the doctor’s face.

“The rules don’t matter.”

The doctor, startled, leaned forward on her desk. “What do you mean, Roy?”

“What I said. There ain’t no rules. I understand that now.”

“Well,” the doctor answered, “there are rules. People don’t always follow the rules, but plenty of them exist.”

Roy combed his fingers through his hair. His scalp was oily. “I used to believe in the rules. Used to play by them. If I knew the rule, I wouldn’t break it.”

The doctor looked at Roy’s chart, then back at him. She opened her mouth, paused, then spoke. “Do you think you broke a rule, Roy? Are you talking about the accident?”

Roy shut his eyes tight. “One time. One Goddamn time, and my whole world explodes.”

Roy snorted in through his nose to stop his tears. “I never drink liquor. One damn time I drink too much. I always un-
loaded my rifle as soon as I came out of the woods. Why in the hell I set it by that door loaded, I'll never understand."

"Roy, that was an accident. A terrible accident. But you're not to blame." The doctor placed her hands palm down against the desk. "Fate. God—I'm not a theologian, but events happen sometimes that seem senseless and tragic and without meaning."

Roy shook his head violently. "They are senseless and without meaning. Shouldn't be any rules because they don't hold up. All we can do is hunker down and hope the shit don't fall on us—that we ain't the one picked. He don't respect the rule followers. Fuck up one time and you're out."

The doctor adjusted her glasses. "Who is 'he,' Roy?"

"You know who 'he' is. He's a son of a bitch."

The snow melted away for good in early March. The first blush of spring began in the courtyard, green onions first, then spears of daffodil leaves. Each morning he watched the drama of hawk and rat. Occasionally now Roy walked in the courtyard in long circles. One afternoon after his walk, Roy used the pay telephone for the first time.

"I do believe you're crazy now," Billy said and grinned. He took a seat on Roy's bed, then reached into his coat and pulled out a small cardboard box. From another pocket, he pulled out a small steel-jawed muskrat trap.

"One Pet World pedigreed rat. One spring loaded varmint trap. Man speaks to me for the first time in two months and asks me to bring him a damn rat and a trap."

Roy took the box and lifted the lid. He stared at a medium sized white rat with black markings. He closed the box and slid it under his bed. He took the trap and put it under his pillow. He looked at Billy and nodded.

"I owe you."

"You don't owe me nothing. A man in the nuthouse says he wants a pet rat and a trap, I bring it." Billy leaned forward and
slapped Roy's arm. "You bout ready to come home, ain't you?"

"I been thinking about it."

"You look good. Hell of a lot better than when I brought you here. You were on some kind'a drunk."

"Wouldn't you have been?"

Billy's smile died. He exhaled slowly. "Yeah. Probably. I'm sorry Roy."

"You ain't got no reason to be sorry."

Billy slowly rolled up his shirt sleeves. He began talking while staring at his arm. "I saw your mama and the baby yesterday. That's a beautiful child, Roy."

"I don't want to hear about her, Billy."

Billy looked Roy in the eyes. "Man, she's your baby. You're all she's got, Roy."

"She's got mama. Mama can raise her."

"Your mama is old. She needs her daddy."

Roy stood from his chair and walked to the window. He gripped the sill and stared outside.

The next morning Roy watched the rats again, saw the hawk swoop in and skewer the chosen one. The morning was bright, the daffodils in bloom. A dogwood tree blazed with blossoms. Roy sat by the window nearly all day until midafternoon when the black man came and left with his can of scraps. He moved from the window then and took the cardboard box from under the bed. The rat had nibbled a piece of biscuit. Roy took the rat in his hand and studied it for a moment.

"Sorry man. My time's coming. I'll get mine, you can bet."

Roy circled the rat's neck with his thumb and index finger and squeezed. The rat gapped his mouth open and struggled. Within a minute, the rat ceased to fight. His pink eyes glazed over and closed halfway. Roy held his grip another minute until he was sure the rat was dead. Then he slipped the rat and the rat trap into his coat pocket and walked to the nurses' station to sign himself out to the courtyard.

Roy walked his usual circles for several minutes. He
 scanned the trees for the hawk, but saw only robins and other song birds. When he was sure no one was paying him any attention, he let his circle carry him behind the dumpster. Quickly, he kneeled and emptied his pocket. He set the trap and carefully placed it on the ground. Using his heel, he pushed the holding stake into the soft ground. With care not to touch the trigger, he laid the dead rat in the center of the steel jaws. Roy brushed a little dirt over the chain. He stood, studied his work for a moment, then once again scanned the trees. No hawk. He turned and walked straight inside.

Roy sat by the window the rest of the afternoon. He got drowsy and twice slapped his face to wake up. The sun was barely above the western horizon when Roy was jerked bolt up in his chair by the flash of wings.

The hawk hit the rat with both feet. The force drove the rat against the trigger, springing the jaws. They closed with a snap, meshing rat and hawk talons. The stunned hawk flapped his wings and tried to take flight, but was snatched back to earth by the short chain. The bird spread his wings to keep balance and lashed at the trap with his beak. As dusk fell, the hawk’s efforts grew weaker. He panted, occasionally emitting shrill cries. Finally he was swallowed by the night.

Roy awoke with a start, a shaft of sunlight coming through his window. He bolted from bed and hurried to the window. At least a dozen rats covered the hawk’s carcass. Not much remained but a mass of bones and feathers.

Roy sat straight up in his chair in the psychiatrist’s office, arms folded defiantly. The doctor looked at him while tapping a pencil eraser against the desk top.

“You got to be the one making the rules,” Roy repeated. “I understand that now. If you’re the one making the rules, you make rules you like.”

“But you can’t make all the rules, Roy. Other people make rules, too, and you have to follow them.”

Roy unfolded his arms and leaned forward. “Control. That’s
what you gotta have. I lost my control for a while, but I know how to get it back now. You got to make the rules before the other guy does. I'll be all right now. I'm ready to get out of here."

The doctor looked down at Roy's folder for several moments. "You know you've been free to leave any time. Roy, I'm glad you feel well now."

"I've got to get final control over my life. That's all. I understand where the trigger is now."

Roy stood from his chair. The doctor smiled at him, but her smile was not reflected in her eyes.

PART THREE

The canoe cut the smooth river water with hardly a sound, Roy handling his paddle with the experience of three days afloat. Jock sat high in the bow, barked occasionally and snapped at bugs. Midmorning had passed, the April air heavy with vapor and pregnant with the fragrance of honeysuckle. The sun was yet upon the water, the shady depths reflected a bank lined with mixed stands of black oak and sweetgum.

Roy cut to the inside of a long curve in the river. Ahead, he saw nearly a mile of straight, shining water. Jock raised on his front feet, his ears pitched forward while his nose twitched.

"What you see, boy?" Roy asked, drawing a wag from the animal's tail. It was then Roy heard the low rumble. His first thought was that a thunderstorm was brewing, but that was unlikely this early in the spring. Could be the drone of traffic where 64 crosses the river, he wondered next, but according to his map, the bridge was several miles distant. He paddled slower, the sound growing louder in volume like an advancing train.

Roy laid his paddle in the canoe and stood carefully, balancing his weight on slightly bent knees. He lifted his binoculars and turned the focus knob until the far curve of the river
came into view. Then he backed up and refocused on something protruding from shore.

What the hell? Concrete walls. Some kind of little hut on the bank. He moved to the middle of the river. The water looked strange, the smooth sheen of reflection broken momentarily, only to reappear. After several seconds, he realized he looked at a waterfall that cracked more than half the river. Roy sat back down and pulled his map from a plastic sack. He studied carefully the area beyond the last road they passed.

"Hell yeah," he mumbled when he noted the tiny black marker. "A lock and dam. Why they need a dam on water this slow?" He wished he had taken time to purchase a topographical map.

The roar of falling water grew louder. A sign riveted to a red buoy warned boats to stay to the right bank. Jock barked at the bell shape of the buoy, Roy angered by the unexpected obstacle. He wondered if the operator would put such a small craft through, how long they would be delayed, if the lock was even in operation. He swore softly as they swung out of the faster current into slower water close to shore. He didn't need complications this last day on the river, when everything seemed almost normal the past three days. Not after the hell of the last six months.

The river had made things right. Here on the water, under the clouds of early spring, he had taken charge again. The water flowed east as steadily as the passage of time. He could ride that passage, leap ahead with several hard pulls on his paddle, or let the canoe drift broadside, moving slower than downed leaves that skittered across the surface. He could throw a stick and command Jock to retrieve it, could stop when he wanted to and open a can of beans and franks, throw out a fishing line or simply sit and listen to the sounds of birds. Slowly, he felt he had become a man again, a man in control of his fate. A strange peace had taken over his mind.

Last night, huddled near the fire, he had handled the pistol
for the first time. A .38 long barrel, the chamber full of wad cutters: he liked the way the cylinder clicked each time a shell locked in place. The gun was heavily oiled and blued, the handle made from handcrafted walnut. A man's weapon. Here, swallowed by the song of crickets, he felt control again, far separated from preachers speaking of the unblaming will of God. When the trip ended, when the tremor was out of his hands and he was docked in Trenton, he planned to rent a room in the Hilton that overlooked the water. He would buy a fifth of Wild Turkey and drink it slowly while watching the twilight settle over the river. Then he would take out the big gun.

Roy kept the canoe within a few yards of shore as the roar of the falls grew louder. He scanned the dam with his binoculars. The brown river water slid heavily over the concrete lip where it dashed itself to spray and vapor on rocks twenty feet below. Soon he was only a hundred yards in front of the concrete gate that opened into the lock. If he was lucky, they would be lowered on an elevator of water. If not, they were in store for a hell of a portage. Roy took his air horn from the pack at his feet and let go a long blast. Jock yelped at the shrill sound. When they were nearly upon the lock, a man appeared above them on a metal walkway. He lifted one hand.

"Hello," Roy shouted above the din. "Reckon you could put us through that thing?"

The man nodded. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Back up some and let me open the gate."

Roy pulled at the paddle and retreated several yards. He held the canoe steady by holding to a willow bough. The man went into the small office and shortly a humming sound began, the twin gates shuddered at first, then slowly opened to reveal a chamber as wide and long as three city buses. When the gates were fully open, the man left the office and instructed Roy to hold to a metal ladder as the water lowered. Jock trembled and barked, and Roy commanded him to sit. But the
water emptied from the chamber so smoothly, Roy only knew they were being lowered by the fact that he had to keep reaching for a lower rung. Soon, the front gate opened, revealing the last twenty mile stretch of river to the sea.

Outside the chamber, the roar of the water coming over the dam was loud like thunder. The current was strong, the water from above boiling under and erupting to the surface in a fury of white bubbles and foam that churned the surface for fifty feet. Roy kept the canoe close to shore until he had passed the worst. Jock huddled low in the bow, snapping at fingers of vapor. Roy looked over his shoulder and waved once at the lock operator who watched from his perch.

Roy was startled at the change in the river. Gone was the coffee-colored water and muddy banks of the upper channel. The water here was dark and translucent like tea, the shore and sandbars made of coarse white sand. The hardwoods that had shaded his travel were rapidly thinning and replaced by thick strands of cypress and water oak. The change assured him more that his run was nearly over.

Roy ate a quick lunch of Vienna sausage and saltine crackers, throwing one of the wieners to Jock who begged with wet, brown eyes. He drank nearly a pint of water from his canteen, then resolved to paddle the rest of the day until they were off the river. He felt good, almost lightheaded. He could wield his paddle and the canoe would move and the hell with anything else right now.

Roy had rowed steady for more than two hours when he began to feel that something wasn’t right. The canoe just wasn’t tracking as it had upstream, didn’t zip across the water like it had yesterday or the day before. Whenever he paused rowing, the canoe lost speed quickly as if she was dragging dead weight. Roy looked at the sides of the canoe and saw no branch hung up. The canoe wasn’t leaking. He glanced at his watch. Three p.m. He wondered why he hadn’t already passed the bridge that carried 64 over the river. According to his map, the road wasn’t far below the lock and dam. He knew he’d have

Below the Last Lock 179
to pass the bridge soon if he was to make Trenton by night. By
God, he was going to make Trenton.
Roy stopped rowing and scanned the bank. The slow track
of the canoe stopped, the boat skirted to one side and began to
drift backwards. What the hell? The current was flowing west,
back toward the dam. He knew he hadn't turned around. Roy
glanced at the sun and where it should be in the sky. Why
is the Goddamn river flowing backwards? Then the answer
struck him. That was why they built the dam. The river this
close to the ocean was controlled by the tides. The tide was
rising and water was being forced upriver where it backed up
against the dam. Roy noticed that tree trunks were dark to a
line nearly three feet above where the water stood now. High
tide was still several hours away.
Damn. Everything has gone so well and now this, Roy
thought. I'm exhausting myself rowing against the fucking
tide.
Roy set his jaw and stabbed the river with his oar. "I'll be
damned if you'll whip me," he shouted. "Not now." The
canoe inched forward against the rising tide.
Roy fought the current for another three hours until his
arm and back muscles were knotted and sore. He had finally
sighted the bridge when a large sandbar appeared on the right
side of the river. He turned and drove the bow of the canoe
high on the white sand, his chest heaving down air.
Jock bounded out of the canoe and lifted his leg on a
washed-up styrofoam bait bucket. Roy stood in the canoe,
his knees popping, then stepped into the shallow water. He
walked several yards up on the sandbar, then flopped against
the ground. The sand was damp and moisture slowly soaked
through the seat of his trousers. He picked up a handful of
the sand and slung it toward the water. "Goddamn tide," he
mumbled. Roy glanced at the sun now beginning to slide to-
ward the western horizon. He estimated that in the past five
hours he probably hadn't traveled five miles. If the current
didn’t turn soon, he hadn’t a chance of making Trenton. He cursed, his face turned toward the sky.

Roy was startled by Jock’s wet muzzle against the side of his face. He pushed the dog back and turned to see a stick in his mouth. “Get back,” he grumbled, then wiped his jaw. The dog stood patiently wagging his tail. Roy took the stick from his mouth and slung it far into the river. Jock did not hesitate a second before plunging in. He caught up with the stick quickly on the swift current, then turned and fought his way back to the sandbar. Roy knew he would go after the stick a dozen times if he threw it.

Roy studied the low sun, then the contours of the sandbar. The smooth, clean sand indicated that the high tide covered the bar by at least a foot. Beyond the sandbar was marshland studded with thickets of cattail and wild blueberry. The trash from old fishing campfires littered the bank: beer cans and wood ashes and junk.

You ain’t kicking my ass, river, Roy thought. I can’t make Trenton before dark. I’ll stop at the bridge, take what I need and hitchhike in.

Roy whistled for Jock and pointed at his spot in the bow. The dog whined, but took his position. Roy pointed the canoe downriver. He leaned over and placed his hands on both sides of the stern, then began running as he pushed the canoe toward deep water. The toes of his sneakers dug into the soft sand, the river rose to his knees.

Roy’s first thought as he fell was that he had stepped off a shoal into deep water. As he pitched to one side, he almost lost his grip on the canoe, but managed to hold on with one hand. His upper torso pitched forward under water, his head-long plunge stopped suddenly by a searing pain in his lower back and right leg.

Roy pulled the canoe close to him, hung his arms and head over the side and passed out from the pain. When he opened his eyes again and pushed Jock back from his face, the water
had risen to his neck, the sun was low in the sky and doves were beginning to coo. He looked wildly about. Instinctively, he struggled against his bond, a searing pain in his hip causing nausea and dizziness to roll up from his gut and into his head.

Roy steadied himself against the canoe, then reached into the murky water. His left leg pointed straight forward, the right one was buried to his groin. He ducked his head under the water, scraped at mud around his thigh, his fingers reached what felt like narrow slats of wood. Gently, he felt around his wounded leg, felt sharp splinters thrust into his flesh, a wide rusted iron band ran along the inside of his thigh. Whatever he had busted through rounded to both sides as if he straddled the back of a very wide horse.

Roy realized he had stepped through the hull of a wrecked skiff, years ago washed upside down upon the sandbar. His hip was broken, his leg held fast between the keel band and aged, treated wood. With no leverage, fighting intense pain, he saw little possibility of pulling free. The water lapped at his throat. He ducked his head under again and jerked at his leg, but the murkiness and daggers of pain made him lose all sense of direction. He surfaced gasping for air. Roy craned his head around and studied the sandbar. The tide would crest a couple of feet over his head.

Blind panic made him jerk upwards violently. He screamed as the pain made white sparks dance before his eyes. He shouted for help, but knew no one would notice him from the bridge. Jock fidgeted in the canoe yelping in confusion.

Roy’s pain cleared his mind quicker than icewater, his panic replaced by rage. Soon, he was going to drown in a manner totally out of his control. Someone would find his body, a preacher would stand over his casket and say it had been God's will, that now Roy Breece had found peace. Roy opened his mouth to curse just as he noticed a length of rubber hose lying half buried in the sand.

“I ain't whipped yet, damn it all,” he mumbled.

The hose lay at the edge of the bank only fifteen feet from
Roy looked at Jock. "Fetch boy, fetch," he said. The dog's ears perked up, overjoyed that his master acted normal again. He trembled as he waited for another command. "Fetch boy," Roy repeated. He steadied the canoe with one arm and made a throwing motion with the other toward where the hose lay.

Jock leaped from the canoe and started toward the sandbar. Upon the sand, he ran in circles, sniffing for Roy's scent on any of the sticks and debris. Twice he stepped on the hose as Roy yelled for him to "fetch it here." Finally the dog picked up a stick and, half swimming, half running, brought it to Roy. "No boy, no," Roy said. He twisted the dog's head toward the hose. "Fetch that. Fetch the hose." He made another throwing motion that sent Jock splashing toward land.

Roy had to send the dog back twice more before he seized the hose between his jaws. "Yes, Jock. Fetch it here. Fetch." Roy shouted. The dog leaned back and struggled to pull the buried end from the sand. He came bounding to his master, the ends of the hose trailing behind him in the water.

The river was almost to Roy's chin. He studied the hose nearly ten feet long, one end containing a brass coupling, the other cut off clean. He swished it back and forth in the water, blew through to clear out the sand. He clamped the hose under his arm, then pulled the canoe backwards and tied the bow rope tightly to his belt. He reached inside for a gallon milk jug filled with water. He drank deeply from the jug, then poured the rest out and screwed the top on tight. His extra shoes were stowed under the seat. Roy grabbed one and removed the lace. Jock watched from the shallow water close to shore.

Roy slipped the cut end of the hose through the handle of the jug, extending it a foot beyond. Using the shoe lace, he bound the jug and hose tightly together. He held to the brass end of the hose and let the jug glide with the current until the hose was extended. The jug bobbed on the water, the end of the hose thrust upwards like a ship's mast. Roy put the coupling in his mouth, closing his lips tightly. He pinched his
nose shut and leaned forward until his face was under water. He could breathe!

Jock danced upon the sand until he could stand it no longer. He leaped into the current and swam toward the floating jug. Roy screamed for him to stop, but the dog continued and grabbed the end of the hose between his jaws. He turned with it toward Roy, causing water to spill into the airline.

Roy ordered him back to shore, and once again cleared the pipe and floated it upstream. The water was nearly to his bottom lip. The sun was behind the trees now, dusk matting out the shadows. Roy was amazed at how clearly his mind worked, as if he had taken some exotic drug that extended his senses far beyond normal range. He watched Jock paw at the water, his eyes bright and eager to please.

“Stay boy, stay,” he ordered. Roy pulled at the canoe until he was holding to the stern. From a plastic sack he took his .38. He pulled back the hammer until it clicked twice. He clamped the hose under his chin, then pitched his shoe several yards upriver.

“Fetch boy,” he shouted. “Fetch the shoe.”

Even held with two hands, the gun was heavy, but Roy gripped it until the sights were fixed on the back of Jock’s head. He noticed how rough the grip felt in palms long soaked with water. His friend had nearly reached the shoe when Roy squeezed off the round.

He saw a flash of blue, felt the pistol jerk toward the sky as the roar of powder numbed his ears. The dog pitched forward in the water, most of the top and back of his head blown away. He turned slowly in the current, legs splayed out and trembling, before slipping underneath. Roy stuffed the pistol under his belt. He tried to focus on the notes of a mourning dove, tried to breathe slowly and deeply. He touched his shirt pocket to make sure his small, waterproof pen light was still there. A full moon gleamed in the eastern sky when the water topped his ears and eyes.

The water seemed especially chill to Roy as it slowly topped his scalp. Twilight faded, and he was in a world of darkness, of muffled sounds, the river coursing around his body like a constant wind. He could hear his heart beating in his ears, rapid but regular and strong. He breathed in long hisses, fighting to push and pull air through the long hose. To reduce his panic he counted each breath, no longer aware of the pain in his leg.

Just breathe slowly. Don't think about it. A few hours and the tide will start down. Innnn. Ouuuut.

Something bumped into Roy's back. He jerked as a large fish slid by. Water leaked into his mouth, momentarily gagging him. He swallowed the water, but had missed a breath and now had to suck longer and harder on the pipe. His panic rose and for a moment he thought of once more trying to wrench free his leg and burst upwards to the moonlit surface. Roy raised one hand above his head until it surfaced into the cooling night air.

And you'll drown trying, he told himself. Drown and he'll have taken everything from you. Even your choice of death. Roy saw lights dance before his eyes as the lack of oxygen lightened his brain. When he looked up, he could see the moon shimmer high above in the sky.

If I ain't careful, I'll pass out and still damn drown, he thought. He concentrated on several long breaths.

Innnn. Ouuuut. Roy cried, his tears instantly swept away by the river. His sinuses ached so he momentarily removed his fingers from his nose and blew out clear snot. He was one with darkness, only aware of his heartbeat, his long, tortured breaths. But he hated himself even more now for again losing the upper hand, and hated God more, and hate would keep him breathing until he was able to finish his life his way.

The universe became softer, quieter, dimly lit by moon glow as if he floated in some diffused portion of space where
existence was only the sound of a heartbeat and labored breathing. He became drowsy, so he concentrated on those sounds, rolled the taste of copper over his tongue, counted each breath. Again, he felt something bump his back. The fish swam around him. Seconds later, another fish bumped him, then another. In the dim washed light, he saw objects moving past, silvery shapes that undulated through the water. Roy wondered if he was hallucinating. He felt for his pen light and turned it on. The bright, round beam punched into the darkness.

Stripers. Dozens of them were swimming upriver. The fish migrated each spring into the rivers and creeks to lay their eggs and the first huge school was passing him, fat, pregnant females pushing against the current to that spot where they would spawn. Roy clicked off his light and remembered days when he had fished the river for stripers and shad, the schools so thick he snagged some with a grapple hook. More and more fish bumped him in the darkness. Their silvery scales caught the moonlight, causing each fish to resemble a pale ghost.

Roy stared in amazement. Hundreds of the fish moved by him now. He clicked on his light again and saw many of the striped bass were already spewing eggs. The eggs streamed behind them like strings of bubbles, catching and casting their own reflected light. He felt movement against his leg and turned the light there. The female was laying eggs, the mass sticking to him as it might to a submerged log or stump. The water flowing around Roy was thick with eggs. Some stuck to his shirt, to his arms, to the skin of his face. Fish passed him by the hundreds, the river rank with roe. In his light beam Roy saw smaller, predatory fish sucking in eggs, but for each egg eaten, a thousand more were laid. Wave after wave of the long silvery fish passed. Roy stared in wonder at the spawning of so much life.

The universe was now a world of reflected moonlight, the fish like passing comets, the eggs thousands of life-supporting planets. He felt as if he stared into the night sky at distant
galaxies, nebulae, to the far boundaries of the cosmos. The eggs whirled in the current like a blizzard, millions of potential lives flushed from the womb into the currents of fate. The females swam against the current, released their eggs, some eaten within seconds, thousands more to float on the ebb and rise of tide and hatch. Some would grow into adult fish and go to sea, only to return to this same river and spill their own young. The cycle would go on and on and on. Roy shut his eyes hard. The fish bumped him, engulfed him and coated him with clouds of roe. He concentrated on his breathing in and out and in.

The wind on Roy's face brought him around slowly. Beyond his tightly shut eyes he became aware of light, of bird songs, the breeze tickled the small hairs on the back of his neck. He wondered if he was hallucinating and hesitated before opening his eyes. The light made him squint and blink before he saw water lapping around the legs of his jeans. He sat hunched forward, the hose still clinched tightly in his mouth. His skin and clothes were coated with fish eggs. The canoe trailed behind him, drawn seaward by the ebbing tide. He lifted his head; his neck muscles burned like fire. Another fire burned below the horizon in the east. Roy took the hose from his mouth and breathed deeply of cool, morning air.

Now Roy could see clearly the boat hull. His leg throbbed with every heartbeat, but the pain only made him more awake and aware. Roy studied the wood, the iron keel band running around the inside of his thigh. He took the pistol from his belt and cradled it carefully in both hands.

Doves called from the brush: a woodpecker hammered against a dead tree. The river surface was flat as glass and stilled by low tide. Roy listened for a moment to the grind of morning traffic crossing the bridge a half mile downstream.

The angle had to be perfect. Roy rolled the cylinder several times, wiped moisture from the barrel, aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger. The first shot punched out a hole two
inches in diameter in the hull, splintered the grain, rushed into flight the woodpecker, several doves, a pair of mallards hiding beneath a willow limb. Two more shots rent the keel band, curled downward the ragged edges, another slug to the right of his leg shattered the hull just inches behind his buttock. Roy felt the pressure release, his leg slipped upwards several inches. Hot pain began slowly as his circulation returned, but he smiled as he slid further back upon the hull, dragging his leg from the vise.

Roy lay upon his back in the mud and straightened both legs. His muscles burned, joints ached. He felt splinters of bone grind in his hip, but was relieved that none had pierced his skin. He pushed himself sitting, fired the last shot above the water, then threw the pistol toward the spot where Jock went down. Downriver, he spied a small fishing boat coming his way.

Roy half dragged himself, half rolled until he lay on his back in the middle of his canoe, one leg over each side, his head resting against his pack. He shoved with his good leg until the canoe slid to deep water and began to float. The wind swung the canoe in slow, wide circles, the sun in the branches warmed his face. The birds resumed singing, their tune oddly familiar like a lullaby. Roy cocked his head toward the song and began to hum.