THE BEAUTIFUL DEAD END

A NOVEL

CLINT HUTZULAK

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We're everywhere, all the dead of the world. Our final trick, becoming visible again in stone and root and leaf. Translating ourselves into words. Laid out in our dark cloth of letters, spread thin on white sheets, you can see us in any alphabet. Look closely: we are breathing in the spaces between the words.

JACK-LIGHTING

HE IS WIRED ABOVE MY HEAD. This photograph is my father. Everything is naked around him.

My father's love was not love. Now I can see my father more clearly, even though he is much further from me. What can I say about him that has not already been said about every father? I will not tell you about his hands, which were so big he could carry in one palm an entire globe of pain the size of a fist. His fists which knocked down doors and went through glass as though cutting only air, his fists still fists on the bloody newspaper spread over the kitchen table where I tweezered glass from between his knuckles and from the backs of his hands.

The summer I left home he worked afternoons and evenings as a stock clerk in the IGA across the street. Railway Avenue. Behind the IGA, where we couldn't see them, the railroad tracks ran in four par-

allel sets, and beyond that, up a bit of a hill, was the highway. From the kitchen window in our apartment you could see the lights at the intersection change, and hear the big rigs downshift when they were slowing up to the intersection, and then the roar of the diesels as they went through the lights and cranked up for the climb out of the river valley. Our living room windows—there were three of them—looked over 100th Avenue. Our apartment was on the third floor, over the newspaper office and stationery store, right on the corner, so we were always looking down at the T-intersection of Railway and 100th. When you looked straight out the living room windows, you were looking at the Cecil Hotel, which I think is the kind of hotel every city has near the railroad tracks. There was a bar there on the corner, with a door that swung inward to a cool, beer- and smoke-flavoured darkness, which my father for some reason boycotted and, at the back of the hotel, with a newer glass door which opened onto 100th, was the off-sales, next to the alley.

My father grew African violets. Barricaded in front of the living room windows, which got light from the east in the morning, he had brown folding card tables set up permanently. The furry-leaved plants gave him some kind of comfort, I guess, but I know they were also a hassle. He'd come home from a shift and I'd hear him banging the kitchen cabinets as he got down a glass for the whiskey and a plate and cutlery for a late dinner, and then he'd go into the living room and set his plate on a corner of the plant table and sit down and eat in front of the plants. Most evenings he brought home half a roast chicken and some cooked vegetables from the store, and he'd have one glass of whiskey, rarely more. As he ate, he'd pluck dead leaves from the violets and otherwise fuss a bit with the plants. Then he'd turn off the lights and sit in darkness at the window and watch the off-sales. It was a habit he had. He'd sit

in the darkened living room, eating the roast chicken, and watch the young men parked in front of the bar. The cars would come by all evening, until the off-sales closed around midnight, and they'd park for maybe five minutes, and one or two of the people from the car would go up the cement steps and into the bar, and whoever was left in the car, usually women or girls, would listen to the radio or music on the stereo, and their voices and the music would come up to our window. My father hated those kids, particularly the punks, as he called the boys. He had volunteered for the war, and he'd gone over and been shot through the leg and sent home again, all by the time he was the same age as the kids down there in front of the bar, and he never gave a reason for it, but his disgust was clear to me. My father was a tall straight man and people at times mistook him for a cowboy, but it was anger that kept him thin, not hard work outdoors.

Some of the kids, the younger ones, about my age, he saw with their mothers in the IGA, helping with the grocery shopping after school. The older ones, singly or in pairs, would come in later in the evening to do their shopping, and sometimes they were a bit drunk or stoned, and that kind of behaviour irritated my father, and on evenings when he had been subjected to some annoyance at the store, he'd come home and drink and not say anything. Those kids don't know shit, he'd say on other occasions. He'd overhear their conversations as they walked down the aisles in the store. I hope you're getting a better education than they are, he'd say to me. He had dropped out after grade eight, to work. I was failing school, and that seemed to give him the justification he needed to cut me off, so that we spent most of the time we were at home together in silence.

The only thing we really did together as father and son was fish. For that we didn't need words. In the summer, he'd come home

from work some nights and want to go fishing. The IGA stayed open late, so it would always be dark when he finished his shift. I'd gather together the rods and the plastic ice bag he used to carry the fish in, and the heavy red six-volt lantern we kept at the bottom of the hall closet, and he'd take a can of corn niblets or a bag of miniature coloured marshmallows, and we'd walk through the darkened streets of the town to the river. There was a new bridge over the river, for the big rigs going north through town instead of west, and we'd cross the bridge and hop over the guard rail at the far end and scramble down the embankment a bit and then duck under the bridge.

It was sometime in August, I think, the end of a long week of heat. I remember the smell of the musk oil my father wore that evening against the mosquitoes. The river ran black and loud under the bridge, and together we tied leaders on our lines, a white and red float at the top and small lead weights with brass eyes at the end of the line, and a triple set of small hooks that we baited with the corn or marshmallows. We stood on the concrete abutment with our heads almost touching the underside of the bridge deck, and below us the river swirled slow and deep, between the bank and the first pier. Whenever a car or truck passed overhead we would both instinctively duck, the whole deck vibrating above us.

As soon as the lines were ready, I took the net and the flashlight and skidded down the clay bank to the foot of the concrete support, and eased my way out on the weed-slimed rocks immediately below my father. Keep coming, he called from overhead, until he could see I was in position, and I turned the lantern onto the water and shone it down, the water suddenly revealed as murky green shot through with flecks of brown, and we could see the fish

schooling in the deep slack water in an eddy beside the pier. Moths fluttered in the cone of our light, and from beneath the girders of the bridge, bats flicked like torn black paper, swooping low over the river.

He cast first one line then the other into the pool of lighted water and fish would swim up toward the surface, see the bait on the invisible lines, and strike. We caught three or four fish in a half hour with the jack-light, and my father reeled the fish in, angling the line toward me, and I held the aluminum handle of the net out over the water until I could scoop it under the fish and bring them in to shore. I had the steel fish chain anchored in the shallows among the stones, and I'd press their jaws open and slip the steel shank through the mouth and out the pink, flared gills. The fish already strung out on the chain would flip and wriggle as I lowered the whole thing back into the water. The lantern was tied on a lanyard around my neck, so the netting of the fish, the unhooking and chaining was all done in intermittent light, the beam of the flashlight shooting around the space below the bridge as I scrambled to catch hold of the line.

In that way we saw the rubber inner tube coming down the river. At first I heard nothing, as the river was so loud, and I was so close to the water, but my father saw it, and called down to me to put out the light. I switched off the lantern and looked up at him and he was crouched on the edge of the concrete above my head and looking out over the river. I turned to follow his gaze and I saw the inner tube, a big one from a tractor, twirling slowly down the centre of the river, with maybe three or four kids on it. One of them had a flashlight, the beam of light playing over the trees on the far bank of the river. Their voices carried over to us but I couldn't make out what they were saying but they were laughing and when they

passed under the bridge, on the far side of the pier, where we couldn't see them, a couple of them let out whoops which echoed under the bridge and then the tube was visible again, being carried swiftly away from us and away from the town on the black back of the river.

Goddamn punks, I heard my father say, and then he collapsed the fishing rods in the dark and I picked up the chain of fish and put them in the plastic bag.

I'm coming down, he said. Shine the light up here. I turned the lantern up the slope, showing him the path where I had made my way down to the river's edge, and he picked his way down, holding both rods in his left hand like a balancing act, and grabbing onto roots and even the clay for support. Then he was standing on the rocks beside me and I could smell the sweat and the musk on him. He had been drinking in the darkness above me and whiskey was thick on his breath.

How'd we do? he asked. I showed him the fish in the bag.

He looked upriver to the low shelving bank where the fire pit was, where the shallows lay. A dirt track wide enough for a car led down from the highway, curving through the underbrush between the huge cottonwoods and one or two picnic tables that had been donated by the Lions Club. It was a kind of unofficial park. In the daytime mothers would walk down from town with their children to play in the mud at the edge of the river, and most summer evenings there would be families there, sitting around a bonfire, because the bush had been cut or burnt back and the ground was open in that place and a breeze from the river usually kept the mosquitoes off, but this night it was too late for families.

The raft had come from somewhere up there, around the bend in the river, and we could see an electric light glinting through the

bush. If a car had come down to the picnic area while we were fishing, there was a chance we would not have noticed it at all, given the masking noise of the river and the angle of the embankment.

We started up the river toward the light. Walking along the bottomland beside the rushing water, the air was plagued with mosquitoes. At knee height the scrubby willows and poplars were ringed with matted debris from spring floods, dead leaves and grass in fibrous clumps that could be pulled apart into brown dust and torn leaf meal. The river was low now, and we walked on hard mud and dried out rocks below the clay cut bank which marked the height of the spring channel. Why did we choose to walk up the river? It must have been curiosity. We started up together and nothing was said between us, he carrying the rods and I the bag of dying fish.

A hundred metres or so past the picnic area we found where the kids had launched the tube raft. Three pairs of running shoes had been piled on a flat rock by the water's edge, and someone had left a pair of pants draped over a bush. Empty beer cans had been trodden into the mud around the rock, and the embers of a small fire glowed among the stones. My father cursed and kicked the remains of the fire into the water and looked up the bank. A path had been worn down the face of the clay, and above us we could see the dome light of a car through the bush. A radio was playing quietly.

Let's see what the hell's going on up there, he said then, and I could hear the anger in his voice. Maybe it was about the fire left carelessly on the edge of the river, the litter of beer cans. I cannot say what he was thinking. In the car above us someone waited, listening to the radio. I followed him up the bank and into the clearing with the car.

The girl was lying in the back of the car with her legs out the door. She had no shoes on, just the bottom of one dirty foot touch-

ing the ground. Someone had taken her dress and pulled it up over her hips. The dome light was on, moths flicking soft as powder against the plastic cover as the car sat there in the bush with the girl in it and no one around.

We stood for maybe a full long minute without moving, looking at the girl passed out in the car, and then my father uncapped the whiskey and swallowed and then swallowed again before handing the flask to me without a word. He glanced up at the moon and then back down to the river and it seemed like he was working something over in his mind.

He set the rods down and got in the back seat between the girl's legs and I said nothing. I didn't call him back. I stood there and felt something tear open inside me and at that moment, when we had started something that couldn't be undone, I saw my father clearly for the first time. There was the night and the whiskey and the girl and we were distant as two planets, my father and I, and yet I was a part of him and carried within me his lightness and all his darkness. What little remained of my childhood was being burned out of me and the knowledge of that was fierce and bitter and exciting. What I lost that night I cannot say.

I went and sat on the hood with my feet crossed and my back against the windshield. Turn that fucking light off, he said. I got off the car and opened the front passenger door and switched the dome light off. He had his pants down around his knees and he was kneeling above the girl, touching her between the legs. Get out of the car and leave me the hell alone, he said. Come back in a bit. I closed the car door and went over to sit against the trunk of a tree. I could see his ass and the bottoms of his shoes through the open door. The girl's legs were sticking out so he couldn't close the door. It would have been too hot in there with the door closed anyway.

After a while I heard him talking to the girl in a low voice but I never heard her say a thing, and then he crawled quickly out of the car backwards and tucked the tail of his shirt into his pants and did up the buckle of his belt.

Alright, he said. I got up from the ground and went over to the car. I touched the girl's leg. It was smooth and still, the skin so beautiful that I started to cry. Don't start up with that shit, he said. He put a hand on the back of my head and pushed me down so I had to get inside the car. The seat under the girl's ass was wet and slippery. Do it, he said behind me. She don't care what you do. He turned on the light above me.

I put my mouth down to her stomach, her belly like a white cake in the moonlight. He walked away from the car a bit, leaving me with the girl. I touched her lips, which were wet and smelled of alcohol. I laid against her for a while, feeling her breath on my cheek, trying to wake her up, saying things in her ear, but she made no motion or sound. After a few minutes he came back and leaned against the side of the car and said, You done? and I eased back along the seat until I could put my feet down to the ground and he said, You pussy, couldn't even fuck her, you're too soft. I walked around the front of the car and puked, the whiskey hot inside my chest and my throat, and he said, The cops can tell who puked if they get that stuff under a microscope in the lab. I found a paper wrapper from a waffle cone in the grass and knelt and scraped the puke and dirt into the paper with the edge of a cigarette box.

We left the car up there above us, the doors open and the small yellow light shining down on the blue vinyl seats and the girl. Night pooled all around the dusty, glowing windows of the car. The radio was tuned to a country station, an old song I wish I could forget the

words to. We slid down the bank and the piping of frogs from the reeds shut off like a switch. The surface of the river was open to the moonlight. Somehow I had lost the lantern, and we splashed out into the shallows where there was light on the water, our jeans soaked to the knees, above us a black lacework of branches against the hard night sky and the stars. Drowned leaves floated past our legs, almost invisible in the choked black water.

Far off, across the river and the fields, we could hear the whine of trucks on the highway, see their lights flickering along a tunnel of trees to vanish around a distant curve long after the sound had faded from hearing.

What are we going to do now? I asked. My fingers were hooked tightly in the back of his belt, holding on to him in the darkness. I clung to him and I hated him.

I needed an answer, but there was none.

Later, I was in the middle of a field. My father was kneeling before me, his hands on his knees. Something was dripping from his mouth.

I will not forget this.