

JESSE WATERS

### *A Man Identifies A Body*

The first part you read is similar to the story of Noah and the Ark; there's God, really unhappy with all the wickedness on the earth, except for whatever Noah's doing. The beginning scene opens where you can see all the people running around with lascivious grins, a building burning in the background—lots of general mayhem like women's clothes being pulled off, an old man being kicked around by some young punks, the diction suggests all this but does so really tactfully, only just mentioning the stuff that counts, like the straw that's fallen from the old man's cart the punks are now pulling to pieces, or the bits of flame falling from what you now see is actually not a building but a tall pole fully ablaze behind most of the action.

Everyone in the city seems to be drowning in each other's debauchery. Then you cut to a scene of Noah at his house, on his knees alone in front of God's glowing face and beard, Noah's got this look like he's confused, but then God holds up his index finger in Noah's face, and explains the whole plan: In seven days He's putting an end to all flesh, anything that breathes air will be dead in the breaking open of all the fountains and the flood-gates of the sky, and he needs Noah to keep all the animals of the earth safe, and to repopulate the earth with his family once the waters recede in forty days. There are eight of them, Noah, his wife, their three sons and each of their wives. The scene then moves to the animals two by two hustling into the side of the ark under blackening skies. You can see God's figure in the background, but his face is hidden by the clouds.

Then the piece jumps ahead in time to this guy Diggy Bates, a sailor. It's late April, about 1983. He's sailing his 32-foot cruiser from a little bay on the east coast of Portugal across the Atlantic to Costa Rica, where he'll dry dock the cruiser for the summer and fly home to Colorado. About a sixth of the way into his journey something in the night smashes the hull of his boat, sinking him fast. Water pours over his sleep like a screaming flood. He wakes gagging on salt and darkness, and in thirty seconds saves his own life, jettisons

his survival raft, supplies, and an airtight box with some charts, paper, pens, and a compass. Strapped to the jugs of water is a small spear gun and 50 yards of heavy fishing twine. At the surface in the black night the sea rolls in huge swells.

Through the narrative you get the idea that Diggy knows how to sail, really can handle himself, like maybe he's been in a tough spot before. He jerks the cord on his inflatable four-man raft and pulls his exhausted frame over the sticky rubber ribs that act like flimsy gunwales. Behind him his boat, the *Osprey IV*, is capsizing and spewing foamy sea water from the splintered, gaping mouth at the hull. Once he's yanked his supplies into the raft, Diggy wraps his arms around his wet legs and watches his boat finally sink.

The story then takes a third jump, and you notice that the jumps aren't in paragraphs, but in sections, with no indenting, and you feel an urge to look back at the first two sections. You re-read a few words from each of them. Then you start the third section. It's a brief introduction to a man whose name you don't get at first, you're just told that he's camping in the Sierra Molina Canyons, in Colorado. The story suddenly doesn't seem concerned with setting up the exact time and place. You discover the man camping has never camped these canyons before, and while he's not lost—he's got maps and everything—the hugeness of the place is overwhelming. You read about an enormous amphitheater high above everything cut naturally into the stone around his campsite, a half-hearted effort—he doesn't even have a compass. You read about the emptiness and the quiet night around him.

You come to find out he grew up on Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota. He'd taught his son Carter how to swim there when Carter was only five, one summer while the family was camping at the lake. The wind picks up and he remembers teaching his son how to swim, and what an astounding thing it'd been, how Carter had just taken right to it. After a week his son knew to turn his head and breathe without being told about it—Carter could even dive by himself from the wooden pier by the path which ran up through the woods to the family's small, red cabin. Everyone was amazed.

The wind howls through the pocket of rock and shakes the man camping out of his light doze. The fire's about to go out. Thunder heads threaten somewhere over the monstrous ocean of forest

beneath the high rock amphitheater. He can see the waves of fir trees moving restlessly under him. The green of it seems to be working its way toward him, up the side of the cliff like a rotten claw.

So Noah gets everyone on the ark, and it starts to rain. It rains so hard everything on the earth drowns; it gets so saturated that even the tallest mountains are swallowed. Noah and his family wait. They eat their rations, they talk and pray, they clean up the animal shit and blood, and throw it over the side of the ark. There's a lot of blood and bones on the ark, more than Noah's family can really clean up, and though the rain helps some, so many of the lions and bears and crocodiles are eating the other animals that someone has to be on watch all the time to make sure no animals are being eaten unjustly. Everyone's exhausted by the fourth week, and the rain doesn't seem to be letting up. In desperation, Noah sends out a raven and a dove to see if any water has receded. The dove comes back with a broken wing; the raven never returns. Noah tries again the next day, this time sending only another dove, and a day later it returns with an olive branch. Noah waits a day, tries one last time just to be sure, and sends out the dove. It never comes back. It must be making its own way now, Noah thinks.

Diggy Bates has been adrift now for thirty-nine days. He doesn't know it, can't know since the charts he needs to figure it out blew away in a storm eleven days ago, but his little raft lies now about 2,500 miles east of Costa Rica, and is moving west in the current at about eight miles a day. He hasn't seen one ship or plane the entire month, and can't help thinking of the story of Noah in the Bible, how Noah was the only one God spared. Diggy wondered what it smelled like in the ark, with all those animals.

Diggy opens his last can of sardines and eats one slowly. It's dark out; he figures it must be close to dawn because the sea is so calm. But it could be just after dusk; the sky is starless and clouded. Diggy hasn't been sleeping much; the blanket ejected with his supplies soaks and dries newly every day, and now drapes over his emaciated body like a salty, crusted board. The horrible rubber raft has chafed his wet skin raw, and dozens of boils and carbuncles bubble out from every pore on his body. Diggy thinks about Job, too. He's never read the Bible, but he knows a bit here and there from a few

of the stories on TV shows with close enough plots, or in small digests he sometimes picked up from different ports. Diggy knows what's right and wrong. He doesn't know why he's here.

Diggy believes he's now close to the shipping lanes between Africa and South America, and keeps the red flare gun in his lap all the time. The trigger is starting to rust at its tip like a bloody tooth.

Suddenly in the thick air Diggy smells the sour taint of iron. A tall ship passes so close he can make out Oriental lettering on the side, figures as tall as he is. His hands shake as he raises the flare gun high in the air. With a hollow pop the flare shoots into the sky and disappears. It's too humid, the air a few hundred feet up just soaks the flare and puts it out. Diggy fires a second, then a third when it too goes out. But the third somehow stays lit long enough for the small parachute to deploy. Diggy feels the waves from the freighter lift him. The ship fades away like a dream figure as Diggy watches the flare sink into the horizon. Two long, dark shapes pass beneath the raft slowly, then disappear to the south.

Diggy swallows three sips of fresh water, about enough to fill a thimble in each gulp. He has eighteen such sips left. The solar still which gave him the water he has now—a yellow, balloon-type thing, the one instrument keeping him alive this past month—has deflated and won't stay up. Diggy's heard that fish have a lot of moisture in their eyeballs.

The man camping opens a tin of smoked oysters. He chokes them down mechanically and stomps out the last of his small fire. Dawn will break soon.

Almost two months after the flooding, just after the last released dove, the ground starts to dry and God calls Noah out of the Ark. Noah's family and all the animals come out and spread over the new, clean earth. Once all the animals are counted and catalogued, Noah builds an altar to God and kills some of the animals as a sacrifice to Him. God then promises he will never again use flood to separate the flesh of man. He calls this his covenant.

For the last five days or so, Diggy's noticed a change in the dorado, strong, bluish, bullet-headed fish about four feet long which have

been curiously pacing the raft since the day after his sinking. Over the past fifty-nine days of the story Diggy has shot, cleaned, and dried five dorado before the violent death thrashes of the fifth bend the spear gun beyond repair. The last three bites of yellowed, stiff meat taste like cheeseburgers, you read, and melon ice cream. Since the last bite of dorado nine days ago Diggy's been starving to death on the rare tiny puckerfish he manages to flip into the raft.

The dorado have always been a silvery blue on the sides with a white underbelly, but these new dorado seem sleeker, more streamlined, and almost camouflage colored. They're more aggressive, too. They batter the raft day and night—in some places the rubber seems so thin.

Something doesn't feel right in the water. Diggy knows the Atlantic now like a lover, and it's too warm, he thinks. High above him and far out to sea, a black speck moves closer and closer. An hour later, just as the sun sets, Diggy can make out the undulation of wings. He leans as far out as he can over the raft's rubber rails, but it's getting darker so quickly. It's gone. Diggy falls back exhausted. In the dark gauze just after night falls an enormous raven lands on the peeling plastic canopy of the raft with a leathery flapping of huge, glossy wings. The bird is so big its wingspan blots out the tiny raft. With a silent heave it lifts into the air back toward land.

Diggy is asleep. The flare gun is an unrecognizable shape of rust and flaked paint. Even the plastic has rusted. The flares are waterlogged. His hair is sun-bleached and his beard falls down to his Adam's Apple. The water around his raft is turning muddier by the mile. While Diggy sleeps a flock of terns swoop and glide over his raft. The air smells like a factory. He can hear engines falling and rising in his dreams.

In July of 1983 Lake Sakakawea flooded to disaster stage. The water level rose sixteen feet in four hours, and it took weeks for the mud and heat to let go of the land they'd both covered. Something bright and incandescent glows over the forest canopy far away. It rises quickly, then sinks slowly into the horizon. The man camping pulls a cigarette lighter from his hip pocket, rummages through his knapsack, stands quickly and lights a hand flare. It sputters in the wind and casts an eerie glow against the white rock around him.

As you read on, he holds the flare high and thinks of his son's funeral, but then that makes him think about the hospital morgue in Pick City, fifty miles from Carter's favorite stretch of the lake. The morgue called him ten days after the flood to see if this certain body was the body of his son. It'd been found that morning by a fisherman. You read that two policemen meet him at the back entrance of the hospital. They all walk straight down two lengths of hallway together. There's a dark red stripe running hip level along the middle of the wall. The three stop and enter a room on the right hand side. A man in a lab coat stands in front of a large, green U-shaped curtain spread to cover what the narrator tells you is a circle of light.

But it isn't. You know it's just a hospital curtain curled around a dead body. In your own way you know just what's behind that curtain, a body on a white bed, with a sheet pulled over the head, or in a black bag with a zipper down the middle, but the story can't tell you about real death. It's got only one way to live, and that's to lie and do the best it can with that lie. So the doctor pulls back the curtain. "Is this your son?"

"Yes," the man camping says, "that is my son."

The flare burns short to a dark cone in his hand, and the man camping can feel the heat leave him slowly through each finger, from his index to his pinky down the stem of his hand. It reminds him vaguely of a specific time holding another person's hand, when they were ill, or dying, but the man camping can't remember the moment well. He is certain, though, that the hand of his memory is not his son's.

These are God's last words to Noah: "So long as the earth endures—seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter—day and night shall not cease."

Diggy swears he can hear the rise and fall of a real engine now, and the madness of believing himself after being betrayed countless times makes his eyes roll madly. What to do? On his knees he can see a white dinghy slapping down the waves just a few hundred yards away. Was it really there? Had he slept, and dreamt? Was he sleeping? In the background the spires of an unknown city rise into the sky. Someone from the dinghy waves at him. He raises his hands and flags crazily.

It's no dream—he's been found. Diggy plops back down into the raft and takes a giggling moment to survey the remnants of his sixty-eight day ordeal: One broken solar still, a rusted flare gun, four strips of torn blanket, wet and shredding, and forty bone dry pages written front and back locked in a ziplock baggy. The engine sounds closer now. Diggy can make out the brown skin of the boatmen and the Brazilian flag running from the stern.

In the book of Job, after God and Satan have put Job through the wringer, through pestilence, misery, death, famine, pain, misfortune and disease, and Job's passed all the tests, he looks up at God and asks, "Why exactly did I have to go through all that? What do I do now? Why did you do this to me?" and God answers back, "My ways are not your ways."

God's ways have a taste; you can taste God if you stick your tongue out far enough and stand in the right places. You can smell his white face and beautiful beard at the bottom of the ocean. You can hear him laugh in the bathroom, he's in the blood of your stool, at the doctor's. His breath is in the gas at the dentist's office. His tongue is in your lover's mouth, in the dark theater packed with people you don't know.

*Our ways are not God's ways. What're our terrible, fantastic ways?*

Then you read a part that's toward the end; you can tell because your eyes can see where the text ends down the page somewhat. It says that the writer cannot come to good, common terms with the qualities of his own heart, and that in an attempt to pacify a strange sense of brimming over in himself, came up with three sort of image-like stories to patch over a black Virginia lake as dark as dreams, where I scattered my mother's ashes, cancer and all. I'd driven down from D.C. to Leesburg, no reason why there in particular, but the highway underneath me had grown horrible and I needed to stop, and back off an easement road about five hundred yards from the exit I found this spot, and tossed her in. A young carp rose up, tasted her heart and shook his head from side to side. That's it, I can remember thinking—that's just it exactly.