

## Three Hunters · *David Guterson*

I CAME DOWN through Echo Canyon, wading and rock-hopping in Echo Creek, and the Game Department man who had spoken of silver trout was a liar by now and the creek screamed as it fell towards the Columbia. It was too hot, the water rode too low between its banks—even the black flies had finished hatching. The fish—all of them—had gone somewhere else. They were not in the creek anymore. They had disappeared from the upper lakes. They had gone to a place no one could ever walk into. I dreamed of that country while I followed the watercourse down between cracked rock walls and the leaves far above shook in a hot wind. Nothing else touched me; I forgot to watch anything else. In my dream I had enough to do, filling my creel full of silver trout. They were big ones but not much for eating and they fought much harder than the real ones ever did. They never got away from you either.

I was sixteen. There was nothing else on my mind.

When I had the dust road under my feet again my feet were surprised. The dust made my nostrils tighten up. A few pine needles that had gone rust-red in the late heat floated past me. I hiked through a grove of birches where the road snaked to avoid falling into Lost Lake and the wind brought the dust up around the backs of my waders. The birches were getting short on leaves.

For September, late September, it felt hotter than I could remember, but everyone talked about Septembers I didn't know about that might have been hotter—even my mother, who seemed to have no memories of anything and never spoke about the past to us or anyone else. Places, people, days, months, whole years had hardened inside of her until there were no good juices left, until there were only the bitter ones. She was a fierce woman, keen, her eyes like the points of arrows, her hair as black as her eyes. The town whispered about her, about her still mouth, her silent eyes, her past, but she showed no interest in words anymore. Her luck had been bad. She had nobody left to blame. My father had been smart enough to disappear before she killed him slowly, though nobody I knew looked at it in just that way. My mother did, and I did, but nobody else knew anything.

What did I care, though—about the town, my mother, or even the

Game Department man who had lied to me through the mustache that crawled over his filmy teeth? I was here. One of my dream fish jumped out of the white sky. I watched the drops of water spiral away from his silver flanks, the sun so strong on them it hurt my eyes, then line spun away from me and then the road reappeared, dust and curling leaves, under my feet where it belonged.

A crow rasped somewhere in the woods as I came down over the cliff-line, speaking to no one, to the wind. I followed the gamepath now, I was no longer in the road; loose stones my waders kicked up bounded down to the shore of Lost Lake, disappearing in thick clots of thornbush as they flew along. I stopped and rifled a couple of big chunk-rocks into the water, inspecting the splashes they made closely, but none of them could satisfy me. They were only splashes—nothing more. The water settled back over them as though nothing had ever happened and the lake ignored me completely.

I slapped across Lost Creek, waders flying up to kick the creekbed stones, and made my way into camp through the old fir forest that had never been cut because of the cliffs.

“Are you hungry yet?” Lane said to me.

He was sitting in the packed dirt next to the firepit, stripped down to his underpants, dealing solitaire with an air of great seriousness about him, as if solitaire held something no one else could ever know about, as if solitaire were a prayer. His face looked bruised and bloody, but the only thing he'd wrestled with had been the blackberries on the far side of the lake.

“Roy?” he said.

I frowned at him, at his underwear, at his purple teeth.

“I'm hungry,” he said into his cards.

Lane was twelve. He had no memories of our father, who had left us to save his own skin. He was thin, too; his long shoulder blades plowed the air behind him like a pair of dorsal fins. A lean kind of tension gave stiffness to his limbs, as though he were ready to jump into the woods at any moment. An alertness ran through him, but he was too young to contain it. It overflowed at his eyes.

I had one memory that was vivid, though: my father striding up a broad stretch of the Little Nelson River in his chest waders, canvas short-vest and spread-brim Stetson while I watched him discreetly from my perch on a boulder below the cutbank. He was like a giant barreling steadily up-

stream, flyrod in hand and smiling stiffly as he crashed towards me, and then with a hand that was gentle and certain he scooped me up beneath his underarm and we travelled together through the spring run-off, lunging towards the bend in the watercourse.

I rested my fishing rod against a pine bough. There were new scratches on the reel spool cover from the rock walls in the canyon. I loosened the straps on my daypack and set it down beneath a tentline. Everything in camp looked familiar and smelled of fir smoke, even Lane.

“Who’s winning?” I said.

He brushed a mosquito from his forearm with the Queen of Spades.

“Nobody wins when you play this, stupid,” he said.

“Then why are you playing?”

“I don’t know.”

I sat down. I fought my waders until they had no choice but to let go of me, then dumped a half-quart of water out of each.

Lying back beside the stones of the firepit I felt sleep coming, and my dream of the country where the fish had gone slipped through a crevice and returned. It was a silent bit of country first of all; nobody fished there but me. When the big silvers jackknifed past the surface of the water their gill covers shone and the parr marks along both flanks rippled and when you brought one alongside, played out and puffing, the flat serene eye of the fish spoke to you softly. There were no mosquitoes in the dream. There were no other fishermen. There was nothing you had come out of and nothing you were going into, either: no home and no future. Winter never came in the dream—the fish ate always and the water stayed temperate. The fish were not plants from the State Hatchery, either; the Game Department man had nothing to do with them; they were all wild, natives: they went with the dream.

I had one; I had my forefinger hooked under the gill cover of a sleek silver male and I was looking down through the perfect fragile young eye that told nothing, that did not even seem concerned with death or exhaustion because those things were not real—

“Somebody’s coming,” Lane said, and threw his cards in the dirt.

We sat there, Lane in his underpants, me in my wet socks, and watched the three hunters work their way across the flat. Lane sprang up and got his jeans on, then sat down again on my side of the firepit.

“Zip your pants up,” I told him.

They carried big game guns, bolt-action rifles that were impossible not to stare at. One of them had a tumpline across his forehead, but the others were bent under the weight of their packs. You could not make out what the stink was that travelled with them—sweat, grease, musk, tobacco, stale whiskey, sour leather—but it was powerful enough, and it arrived before they did. They were downwind hunters, like all men.

“Hello!” I said when they were in our clearing, standing up in my wet socks to meet them.

“Hello.” The one with the tumpline looked at Lane. “What happened to your face?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“He’s been eating blackberries,” I said.

“Blackberries?” the hunter with the tumpline said to me. “Blackberries? Are you kidding me?” He turned to the other two, who were grinning from under their heavy loads.

“Did he say something about blackberries?” one of them said.

“Maybe we didn’t hear him just right,” suggested the other.

“Let’s try this again,” said Tumpline. “Did you say something about *blackberries?*”

“I guess so.” My jaw felt tight. “I don’t know.”

Tumpline let go a sigh of disgust.

“Maybe we better just forget about it,” he said, shaking his head at me sadly.

He twisted himself free of his pack now, and laid his gun down. The others followed suit. One of them wore camouflage pants; his gut hung down over the lip of the waistband like a cow’s udder. I looked for his eyes, but they were three-quarters hidden under pasty lids. Pimples and sores festered across his bare back; thorn cuts—mottled streaks—criss-crossed his forearms; dark blotches stood up where the mosquitoes had nipped him. He looked uncomfortable, as though his body composed some form of private torture.

The second one sprawled out over his pack with his rifle next to him and stared silently at the tops of the trees. Crisp blonde hair rose out of his head like the bristles of a stiff brush, greased into a whipped tuft at a widow’s peak that grew slightly off center. He looked to me like a gigantic choirboy—someone who had grown absurdly large but had changed in no other way since the age of twelve. A scatter of blonde peach fuzz clung

to his chin; his cheeks were frosted with nearly-invisible cottony whorls: otherwise he was twelve and no older. He went shirtless beneath his combat vest and his muscles—the chest swelled too far, the neck cords thick and squat—seemed unreal and disproportionate, like sacs of air beneath a layer of plastic skin.

Tumpline, though, was the bulkiest of the three. He had a lumpy, stubborn appearance—everything about him was huge but unsolid. His sideburns, a deep black-orange color, grew long and pointed towards the corners of his mouth. Sweat glued his hair down over one ear; the grains of his beard stood up like a mat of dark seed grass attached to his face. His lips, blistered and meaty, reminded me of night crawlers. He had gleeful, large-socketed eyes.

It occurred to me that, for some reason, big men always stuck together. They like it that way. They understand each other. Nobody else knows how they feel.

The fat one picked up my rod. He pushed up the bail arm, tightened the drag down, and began to practice his casting moves under the trees.

“You got that all wrong, Tank,” Tumpline said. “You’re supposed to use that near water.”

Tank mumbled something to himself.

“Ain’t that right, Big Guy?” Tumpline asked me.

“Sure.”

“Sure,” Tumpline agreed. He picked up a few of the playing cards and held them out for the blonde one to see.

“Cardsharks,” he said.

“Cardsharks,” said the blonde one, still staring off into the treetops.

Tumpline dropped the cards, one by one, in the dirt. “Ever been to Reno, Big Guy?”

“No.”

“What about him?”

Lane shook his head at the forest floor.

“Never been to Reno,” Tumpline said—to himself, or to no one. He picked at a molar and looked over our camp for the first time.

“Where’s your catch at, Big Guy?”

“I didn’t catch any.”

Tumpline’s plump, raw lips parted. “Big Guy,” he complained. “Big Guy, come on now. Do I look like an asshole?”

“No.”

“Sure he does,” the blonde one threw in. “He looks like an asshole.”

His eyes never moved from whatever he had noticed in the tops of the trees.

“Now wait a minute.” Tumpline scratched at the root of one sideburn with an index finger. “Just a minute here. I don’t believe this. You hiked the fuck up here — am I right? — I mean you hiked *all the way the fuck up here*” — he stood and flopped his arms at the sky; his mouth moved but no words came — “. . . and it’s all too incredible, Big Guy,” he finally got out. “I mean it’s just too fucking-A *incredible*.”

The blonde one stood up now and zipped down his pants calmly. “I told you he was an asshole,” he said evenly, and took a leak with his back to us.

“You.” Tumpline was pacing now. “You — *Little Big Guy*. I want you to tell me the truth. I want you to think hard for a minute here and tell me what the truth is.”

“Okay!” Lane answered.

“Good.” Tumpline saluted for some reason, snapping it off of his forehead so that the salute ended two feet in front of his eyes. “Very good. Excellent. I can see you want to co-operate. It makes me feel good when I see that.”

He double-stepped in a sort of dance around the firepit and crashed down on the ground next to Lane.

“Little Big Guy,” he began, “you are my friend. Don’t ever forget that. I don’t want you ever to forget that.”

“Okay,” Lane said.

“Okay?” asked Tumpline. “Okay. Now listen. It makes me feel good to sit here next to you. It makes me feel I can trust you — do you know what I mean? Don’t answer that. Just sit there. Don’t even *think* about moving. Just answer my question. I need you to answer me. I need the *truth*, for once. I need to know where the fish are up here. I need your knowledge, everything you know, Little Big Guy. Don’t hide it from me. Don’t be selfish, good buddy, *share* it. Be cool. Tell me what I need to know.”

“I don’t know anything, though,” Lane whimpered.

Tumpline slapped his forehead. “I’m disappointed in you,” he said gravely. “I’m very, very disappointed in you.”

He rose and stepped away from us like a man who’s been bitten by a

snake, then turned suddenly beneath the silent firs.

“Leave me alone,” he cursed us now, his eyes bubbling and strange. “All of you. I mean it. I got to think this all through . . . what I’m going to do and everything. There are big, *big* decisions to be made. You haven’t heard the last of me, you assholes.”

“Shut up,” the blonde one said coolly.

Tumpline stumbled away toward the lake. When I turned to check on Lane he stared back wildly, his face shimmering with added blood.

“Hang in,” I told him.

The blonde one unzipped a sidepocket on his pack and brought out a tin of Copenhagen. He tamped a chew in against his gums, then leaned back again with his hands behind the base of his neck.

“Don’t mind Mickey,” he told us. “His brain don’t work right anymore.”

“Alright,” I said.

“I know the dude,” he said through his chew. “He got his mind blown—can’t think straight anymore—but he ain’t dangerous. Sometimes you just have to put up with this shit from him, that’s all.”

“Sure,” I said.

“It’s a waiting game is all,” the blonde hunter went on. “When he gets done fucking around here he’s gonna be ready to *hunt* . . .”

He spit, a five foot riser that cleared the ends of his boots and clapped the dirt in front of him like a shard of buckshot. “What did you say your name was?”

“Roy. Ferris.”

“You didn’t catch no fish?”

“No, sir.”

“Maybe you ain’t much of a fisherman.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Shit,” the blonde hunter said. “It ain’t got nothing to do with you.”

He picked up his gun now, and rubbed circles with the ball of his thumb across the oiled stock. He seemed to have forgotten us suddenly. The fat one, swinging my rod between the trees, appeared lost in a world of his own conjuring. He cocked his wrist, casting laterally, his belly rolling like a wave beneath his t-shirt, the rod tip jumping and then stiffening at the peak of its arc. Occasionally he would stop and casually massage and knead his breasts, or touch his belly knowingly, or paste his hair against his fore-

head, running his hand over his cheeks as if to gauge the extent of their fatness. He ignored everything—us, the forest, the blonde hunter lolling on his pack and spitting chew—absorbed in his body and my rod.

I stripped off my wet socks and draped them over the biggest of the stones that ringed the firepit. Then, barefoot, I tidied up the camp. I stowed my daypack inside the tent and zipped the mosquito netting over it. I closed the tentflaps. I stuffed some sardine tins and soup packages and the bag full of flapjack mix inside my trailpack and lashed it shut. When everything seemed in good order I unzipped one of my side pockets and slipped my fillet knife, buckled inside its leather sheath, behind the elastic band of my underpants.

“Stay cool,” the blonde hunter said when I turned around again. “I don’t give a shit what your camp looks like.”

I nodded. The fillet knife punched against my hipbone. The blonde hunter cradled his gun in his arms and stared up through the branches of the firs. I considered him, his gun, my knife, the trees, then swivelled once more around on my bare heels and unlashed my trailpack. I searched through my things for a dry pair of socks, and when it seemed right I dropped the fillet knife into a sidepocket.

Tumpline came weaving into camp between the tree trunks. When he reached his pack he picked up the rifle that lay across it and pointed it at me.

“I didn’t want to have to do this,” he said evenly.

“Then don’t,” the blonde one answered him. “Put that thing down.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, Private Fields?”

“Didn’t I tell you about his brains?” Fields asked me.

Tumpline clicked off his safety, then pulled back the action on the rifle. His eyes seemed to have retracted even deeper into their sockets, like things at the backs of two caves. “You see this, asshole? This is a Mauser. It carries a magnum cartridge. One hundred-eighty-grain bullets. It could tear a hole where your face is, Big Guy.”

The fat one had come back to the real world. He was staring at me from almost directly behind Tumpline, still clinging to my rod.

My throat wasn’t working. Tumpline’s index finger lay against the trigger; the Mauser was levelled at my chest. I had to stare at Tumpline, into his eyes—it seemed as if that was all that kept him from shooting me. Finally, I dropped my dry pair of socks. I locked my knees—my bladder

felt ready to give out—and held my hands up over my head because I didn't know what else to do. The balled socks rolled over the dirt like a baseball.

“Don't shoot!” I said. I sounded to myself like someone who had just had their tonsils removed.

Lane was crying now, without making any noises except one I could hear, the way he did at night sometimes for no immediate reason. I wanted to say something, anything; it was up to me to tell him what he needed to hear, but my throat had seized up and the blue barrel of the Mauser with Tumpline behind it held me frozen in place while the fat hunter gaped and the blonde one, Fields, chewed.

“It ain't loaded,” Fields said calmly. “Nobody hikes with a loaded rifle.”

“How do you know?” Tumpline swung the Mauser around.

“Pick up your socks,” Fields said.

I dropped my hands. The Mauser swung back—I flinched, but nothing happened. Finally, Tumpline broke into a grin and set the butt of his rifle on the ground. *Nobody hikes with a loaded rifle*, I told myself. I picked up the balled socks and sat down by the firepit, but my fingers couldn't figure out how to put the socks on. It didn't matter—nothing mattered. Lane cried—it was something he did with his face, soundless, invisible to the three hunters—and Tumpline balanced his Mauser against one of the tent-lines, barrel down.

“What a fucked-up waste of time,” Fields muttered to the sky.

Tumpline only pulled at his bottom lip. “Is that yours?” he said to the fat hunter.

The fat one looked at my rod as if he had never seen it before. “Me?” he asked.

“Is it yours?”

“No.”

“Then put it down.”

He did, sheepishly. Then he stood with his hands at the small of his back.

Tumpline swung his pack up now. “Let's get out of here,” he said. “There's nothing for us here, Private Fields.” He pulled the leather tump-line over the top of his head and anchored it just above his eyes, then picked up the Mauser.

“There is nothing here,” he repeated, as if it meant something to anyone but himself.

They cinched in their waistbands, drank from their canteens, took in the slack in their shoulder straps. Fields ejected his chew. The fat one spread bug juice over his cheeks and neck and now his raw skin glistened in the heat. They took their guns up.

“Be cool,” Fields said as they tramped past the firepit.

“Yeah,” the fat one echoed. “Be cool.”

Tumpline never looked at us. “You’re going to be dead,” he whispered to the ground.

Sticks and dry cones popped under their boots — stones skidded from the gamepath above Lost Lake and gravel sprayed down through the thickets below the cliffs. One of them spoke, not words but a rumble, fading as it vibrated through the trees. Finally they went up over the cliffline, through the gap and into the gamepath, and we stopped listening for them.

“Roy?” Lane whispered.

The forest was more silent than it had been, the trees more firmly rooted. Everything seemed solidly entrenched in the blue light of evening over Lost Lake.

“Let’s go home,” Lane said, trembling.

“What for?” I said.

“They might come back.”

“They’re not coming back.”

“They might. Those guys are crazy.”

“Get your shoes on,” I said. “And bring in some firewood.”

That night the weather finally broke. I woke three times to hear the west wind rippling our rainfly; the fourth time I lay back with my hands behind my head and rain popped against the nylon. Lane, burrowed down inside his sleeping bag, breathed in short gasps through his nose, sputtering and wheezing through his dreams. Gradually the sound of the rain hardened into a kind of shattering and the rest of the night sounds disappeared. I gave up listening for the three hunters; they wouldn’t move in the rain; they wouldn’t move anyway, I knew they had forgotten us, but I couldn’t forget them: Tumpline’s dark retracted eyes looking out from behind the barrel of his Mauser. I kicked my feet at his image but there was no solace in it. The rain gathered in a crescendo.

Asleep I waded downriver, fishing the untainted place again. Water broke around the backs of my knees as I fed line to the edge of the current. The only sound echoed from the river itself, a quiet thrashing. Then the

line went taut, the rod bent double, the reel shrieked and ratcheted and a silver trout large as a sea-going salmon broke from the clear surface, dazzling in the sunlight.

She ran downstream, and the reel spool paid out line. I hauled back. The trout leapt fiercely, impaled deep on the slender hook, and from fifty yards I saw the blood foaming in her mouth.

The sky darkened as I brought her alongside. I slipped my finger under one gill cover. When I pulled her from the river, two feet long and fat, meaty, her eggs in their transparent mucus began to slip out of her—hundreds of them dripping down into the river and streaming away.

I didn't want to keep her for some reason. Her great eye shimmered, distorted, miserable. I worked at the hook as delicately as I could, but I ripped her apart anyway and the dark blood streamed from the corner of her mouth. I began to shake and the rain came. When I set her down on the water again she sank gently, wobbling, and in a great curve foundered and came belly up, riding away forever on the river current.

We walked down Main Street in our packs in the rain, and when we passed the Game Department office I mentally cursed Neil Reuthens, the Game Department man. Neil Reuthens didn't count now—I knew that. *The bastards*, I kept saying to myself, because the three hunters had come back to town with me when I had tried to leave them at Lost Lake; *the bastards*, and the phrase fell evenly inside the rhythm of my walk as I stamped home through the patter of rain.

It was Sunday. A State Patrol cruiser, muddy at the rear, sat in front of the Elk Lounge. A few cars were angle-parked in front of the Shop-Rite, and one at the Premier Realty office, but otherwise there was only the rain. Things looked the way they always looked—silent, bored, and unchanging. Nothing seemed to move except the puddles, and they only popped when the rain hit them, settling and stirring beneath a thin gray sky.

*The bastards, the bastards, the sons of bitches . . .* my lips moved, it was like a cadence—but it didn't help, nothing helped: I couldn't get that vision of Tumpline's dark retracted eyes out of my mind.

Main Street, wide and desolate, merged into Highway 26 before us, beyond the town limit, at the bridge over the Little Nelson River. We turned into Kiksiu Street with the backs of our necks to the sky—dead

box elder leaves ground into bleak mush by the rain swamped the gutters—and cut through the thistle and high weeds to our house. Our mother's dark blue Pinto sat in the yard, its rear end rusted orange, the hood held down with chickenwire. Dick Gleaton's cats had pushed the lids off the garbage cans again.

"Don't tell her about yesterday," I told Lane—but I didn't know I wouldn't tell her myself. "She doesn't have to know about it."

"I wasn't going to say anything, you peckerwood," Lane said.

"Who's the peckerwood?"

"You are."

But she wasn't home, predictably, and the heat was on too high; rain drummed against the windowpanes and the screen door clattered in the wind. An odor of rotting fruit rose from the garbage bin next to the sink, a sweet sickly humid smell that permeated everything. Lane switched the television on, immediately, and sat down in front of it. Grown men were bowling on the screen, eying the pins heroically over the tops of their balls and following their casts through with absolute mechanical precision.

I went into the bathroom, to the mirror, to myself. *The bastards*, I said silently, staring at my face, *the bastards, the bastards*, but when I came out nothing had changed. Lane had fallen asleep before the television.

I went into the kitchen and took down a tall can of chili and a bag of rolls, but the garbage smell was too strong, and I took the bin outside into the rain. I went around to the front and fixed the screen door so it wouldn't batter the siding all night, and then, for some reason, I pitched a stone at my mother's Pinto, denting the side wall inexplicably.

"Bastards!" I said out loud, and the rain swallowed the empty word quickly. Kiksiu Street, empty itself except for the rain and the box elder trees, looked dismal and small beneath the sharp wall of green firs that buttressed the mountains to the north.

In the kitchen again I poured the chili with its ring of orange fat into a pan and lit the old gas stove. Standing in the refrigerator door I took a long pull from a carton of milk going sour patiently on the upper shelf. The milk tasted slightly rancid. A wilted looking pineapple had rolled over onto its side down below. I drank off part of the syrup from a large can of Freestone peaches and as I stood there with the metal fruit can in my hand the compartment light suddenly flickered out, throwing the back of each shelf into darkness. I reached in, sliding one of the Freestone halves

into my mouth at the same time, and broke the bulb with my fist, and then, as I drank off more of the peach syrup, my mother slipped in through the back door, quietly.

“Back from the wilds,” she said, and sat down, wet and flush-faced, and threw her purse easily on the kitchen table. Unconsciously, by force of habit, she plugged the coffee pot in.

“Back from the wilds,” I said.

“Any luck?”

I shook my head grimly. “Where have you been?” I asked her.

My mother turned and folded her coat across the back of the chair with careful deliberation. Then she looked me in the eye, evenly.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

I ran a spoon through the chili. “Nothing,” my voice said. “There were these hunters up by Lost Lake. Three of them. They gave us a bad time.”

“Who were they?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did they hurt you?”

“Not really,” I said. “One of them pointed a rifle at me—he was a crazy bastard.”

“Jesus Christ save us,” my mother said, and all of her fierceness began to display itself now; her black eyes went steel and her mouth narrowed. “Did you know your daddy did that to me once, Roy? Aimed his rifle at me? Did you know that?”

“No, mam,” I said, and I looked back down into the pan of chili.

“He did,” my mother’s hard voice said. “He aimed his rifle at me. Drunk and brave and home from the hills. Right here in this kitchen.”

I lowered the flame and went over to the table, where my mother picked bitterly at a thumbnail, and I sat in the chair across from her.

“Mom?” I said.

She looked up, but her eyes gave nothing. They were like shields.

“I can’t stop thinking about them,” I told her. “I’ve been thinking and thinking about them and I can’t stop.”

My mother glared down at her thumbnail again and made a show of complete concentration.

“There are evil men in the world, Roy,” she said. “Jesus Christ save us there are evil men.”