

One Bad Day - A Short Story

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October 6, 2016



About half way into the flood tide we reckoned we had enough water and we pushed the skiff off the beach. It was only a short run to the entrance of Big Creek. About thirty yards off the beach the bay turned to a light chop. The skiff was a 22-foot aluminum flat-bottomed workboat and so had plenty of room for the two of us and enough gear to be out overnight. With the 40 horse Johnson kicker the skiff could get up and go in calm conditions. In order to keep from rattling our bones and teeth we took our time running over to the creek. Mike and I had decided to motor up the creek to see what there was to see. Of course Big Creek got its name from the fact that it was the biggest creek in the area. As far as I know it was also the only creek around that was navigable by skiff for any distance. We had time and in late September in western Alaska, still had plenty of light so we figured we would motor up as far as we could go, spend the night and come back on the high tide in the morning. It took us no more than thirty minutes to get to the mouth at the cannery. The channel at the mouth changed on a pretty regular basis but at this stage of the tide there was enough water to hit it with out to much worry of running up on a new bar. Just passed the dilapidated pier we took the dogleg hard left and then right. I couldn't help recalling the heyday of the cannery when tugs had pushed huge barges up against the pier to off load supplies for the season and to load frozen and canned salmon in the fall. Now there was nothing left but pilings sticking up out of the water. The cannery buildings, a factory, warehouses, machine shops and bunkhouses were in similar condition. Not that long ago it was one of the busiest operations in Bristol Bay with over five hundred fishermen and workers inhabiting this seasonal village. Due to the advent of the fish farm and the bottom falling out of the market for wild salmon, it was now a ghost town.

At this point the creek was about thirty yards across and it was easy to stay in the channel. I took the helm and Mike Bellifont sat up in the bow and chain-smoked. Mike was our winter man. We paid him 1500 bucks a month to stay on the property through the harsh winter and discourage the occasional looter, vandal and straight up thief. Mike looked the part of a loner or mountain man. He was a Vietnam vet, hardworking resourceful, a competent outdoorsman and a heroin addict. I suppose it wasn't completely surprising. Whatever he did in the Nam, apparently screwed up his head. He never talked about it. I'd heard from other people that he had been a tunnel rat or a sniper. Whatever it was, he never left the beach had no contact with any family and used heroin every day. Living in America during the twentieth century it is pretty much impossible to have had no contact with drugs but injecting heroin on a daily basis is pretty hard corps. In the nine years that Mike had worked for me, up until last year, I had no idea how he was living. Last December I had gotten a call from the Alaska State Troopers letting me know that Mike was in jail in Anchorage. They had intercepted a package at the post office, addressed to Mike, that contained ten grams of black tar heroin. He needed my help. I flew into Anchorage, arranged his bail, got him a lawyer and made sure he got back out to the beach. At the time I didn't ask too many questions

but gave him whatever help I could. I was more than curious about what was going on. I suppose I felt an obligation to the company and that was why I was out on the beach after the season was over. Before another winter I had to know how serious the legal and personal situation was. I had flown in the night before, stayed the night in Mike's cabin and we made plans to spend some time together outdoors. In the process I needed to figure out whether I could keep him on with the company.

It was turning out to be a pretty nice day. There are few things I enjoy more than being on the water and being at the helm of a small boat. This was different than being out on open water. The creek gradually became shallower and narrower as it snaked back and forth through the tundra. Sand bars began to appear and steep banks gave way to gray sand beaches. Every time we rounded a bend there was something new to see. A red fox scurried across a glistening beach. A pair of sand hill cranes flapped their wings in unison, lifted off, turned and glided off to the southeast. The area was well known as a calving area for the Alaskan Peninsula caribou herd and so it was commonplace to see cows with their young. As we glided around one particularly sharp bend we were treated to a rare sight. Standing on a six-foot bank not fifteen yards away was the most magnificent buck I've ever seen. It was truly a trophy animal with a huge rack and two large shovels curving down in front of his eyes. At the sound of the motor the buck looked up, inclined his head to the right to get a better look and then turned and slowly trotted away. Of course we both had rifles and it was a shot that couldn't be missed but neither of us made a move for the guns. I guess we both had other fish to fry.

Around the next bend piloting the creek began to take all of my concentration. We had already scrapped bottom twice and I didn't know how much further we could go. Mike was still in the bow and a dozen words hadn't passed between us in two hours.

"What dya think?" he said turning and looking over his shoulder.

"Yea I guess" I replied.

The three sharp cracks were unmistakable, rifle fire. I immediately assumed it was hunters and quickly scanned both banks to see if I could find the source. When I looked down what I saw made me shout

"Oh shit."



Mike was down, slumped in the bottom of the skiff, Blood was pouring out of his head and down the side of his face. I turned the boat sharply and drove it onto the small beach. The impact knocked me to my knees and I dove to the floorboards and froze. After what seemed like an eternity I realized there was no more gunfire. I crawled forward and lifted Mike's head. The back of his head was gone, blown out. Blood and brain pieces were everywhere. He had to be dead, right? Jesus Christ! Next I crawled to the pile of gear, located and unzipped my gun case and pulled out my mini-14. It took me awhile to unzip the pouch where the ammunition was. My hands were slippery with Mike's blood. Christ, there was blood everywhere. I got two twenty round mags, shoved one in my vest pocket, put the other in the weapon and pulled back the charging handle. After hunkering down for a while against the gear pile I figured out that the thin aluminum skin wasn't gonna do me any good if whoever was out there commenced firing again. I threw the rifle over the gunwale onto the sand and followed it. Six yards away was a bank about three feet high. I low crawled to it and pressed my face to the damp earth. I had to think. What the fuck happened? Was it an accident? Were we ambushed? I don't know how long I laid there. It was quiet. The boat engine

must have stalled out. No answers. No more shots. I don't know how long I lay there, thirty minutes, three hours? This time of year the sunset should be around seven o'clock right? Now it was getting dark and the temperature was dropping. The only thing I knew is, I had to get the fuck out of there. After having made up my mind, got cold feet and made up my mind again I decided it was now or never. I jumped up and dashed back to the skiff.

Of course by now it was somewhere close to low tide. I grabbed hold of the skiff and shoved with all my might. I pushed shoved tried to drag but it was no use, it was high and dry. This couldn't be. I tried again and exerted myself until the sweat ran down my face but it was no go. I gave up and crawled into the skiff and lay on the floorboards again. Fumbling through a gear bag I came up with a tide table. The next high tide would be at 6:25 am. Maybe by two there would be enough water. Shit looked like Mike and I would be spending the night together after all. Now the light was gone and I could feel the chill. It got down pretty close to freezing last night. Good thing there wasn't much wind. Resigned to the night I figured that I better do what I could do to get ready. There was no question of making a fire, not with whatever it was that was out there. I had two sleeping bags, two tarps, some water and a food bag that Mike had put together and a flash light. I used one tarp to cover Mike. Not that I thought he would be cold. The situation demanded at least some gesture of respect and it was hard for me to look at him. Little by little, in my mind, I was changing from thinking of the body as 'it' instead of Mike. Next I spread the second tarp on the floor boards with the sleeping bags spread on top. There was enough tarp left over that I could overlap it on top once I was in the bags. I didn't think I was hungry but it had been more than six hours since we had put anything in our stomachs so I dragged out the food bag. I stuck the flashlight down into the bag, turned it on for about three seconds and turned it off. A box of Pilot Bread, a box of Twinkies, what seemed to be a large baggy with slices of some kind of marinated meat and four potatoes, anyway I wasn't going to starve. There were also two cartons of cigarettes, probably Camels, Mike's brand. For an overnight trip, what the fuck was he thinking? I wondered if somewhere there was, equally or more important, a supply of heroin and his works.



I decided yes, had to be. I ripped open the Pilot Bread and a two-liter bottle of water. I was hungrier than I thought and quickly switched to Twinkies. Dinner didn't take long and I rolled up in the sleeping bags to pass the night. Alone with some pretty confusing and scary thoughts my only companion was the Mini-14 that I pulled close. I really didn't expect to sleep much and I was right. The night was surprisingly noisy. I was not alone. The slight breeze rustled the grass and alder along the shore. The movements of higher forms of life at first blended together and then separated and became distinct. The sounds of smaller creatures I felt comfortable ignoring. I strained to hear sounds of larger animals in particular bear or human. After a while I became drowsy and thought I would nod off. At first I wasn't sure but then click, the safety came off and I was wide-awake again. It was the sound of a much heavier animal moving along the bank. It wasn't footsteps instead it was the sound of a large animal carelessly brushing against the bank and the alder having no need to conceal nocturnal movements from predators. Surely it was moving towards me and not away. The faint sound of heavy breathing turned into grunts as the bear lumbered along. I tried to smell the bear because I was sure it would have my scent by now. The .223 rounds in my rifle were most likely useless but I would squeeze off a whole magazine if it got close. Who knows, the sound might scare it off. Or just piss it off. Mike had brought his 30 ought 6 which packed a bigger punch

but the noise of going through the gear in the dark looking for the ammo seemed like not a good idea. I waited and listened. When the bear was right up on the skiff I held my breath, clutched the rifle and felt the undeniable urge to piss. It even bumped the boat once. And then it began to wander down stream. I continued to listen without moving until I had conformation that the animal was in fact going away. The warm sensation in my crotch confirmed that I had pissed my pants.

What next? I checked my watch and the water under the boat with the flashlight and at 12:30 estimated I had another hour and a half to kill. I guess I did sleep some and I woke up with the gentle rocking of the skiff as the incoming tide began to float the boat. I immediately went over the side into knee-deep water and shoved off. Back aboard I went to the stern, pumped the fuel can bulb twice and hit the electric starter, nothing. Hit it again, twice, three times and finally it caught and the outboard roared. I swung the vessel around and headed down stream. In daylight it had been much easier to keep to the channel. In the dark it was tricky. Again and again I ran up on bars and had to reverse the engine and back off. Twice I had to get out and push off. Although wet and cold I was not worried. With the flood it would only get easier and faster. Day light was coming and the longest night of my life would soon be over.