

The Liar's Club - A Short Story

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Here's a short story the older generation can relate to. Takes place in 1935. Two old guys, fishing and telling tall tales. It's cute, but also revolves around some deep sadnesses, as the elderly often carry. Definitely fits our generation. It will make you think about the nature of time, something I do a lot of as I transition from being an obscure early twenty-first century essayist, to being an obscure early twenty-first century short story writer and poet.

At the start of every catfish season, Earl and Jesse bushwhacked their way from the road down to the bank of the Angelina, clearing the footpath overgrown from last summer. The now faint trail wandered through a stand of black walnut trees down to the water. They had left early from Jesse's farm south of Nacogdoches, proceeding carefully for two hours along East Texas dirt one-laners in Jesse's Ford Model A pickup, beat up and road-worn in 1935.

They stared at the waist-high thicket of brambles, thorns and poisonous plants. Having done this every spring going back nearly 20 years to the end of The Great War, they knew the drill. With hedge clippers, machete and rake they set about clearing a new path for this season.

Poison ivy snaked along the ground and climbed the tall trees. Razor-like sawgrass and stinging spurge nettles had to be clipped and raked aside. Impenetrable blackberry brambles entangled everything in their thorns. It was worth the effort because the secret ingredient in this river bend was the breeze that favored it, keeping the mosquitoes moving on.

After clearing they brought down rods, tackle boxes, and two rickety wooden chairs. Together, they carried the steel milk can filled with iced Pearl Beer. A church key opener hung from a string on the handle, and the cold condensate all over the outside felt refreshing just to look at.

Earl, skinny as a bundle of sticks, beard gone white as bone, settled into a deep melancholy brought on by the morning's exercise of clearing the brush. As Jesse thought it might. Strange how something ordinary can hair-trigger a person's thoughts into a very unwelcome place. The tangled undergrowth took Earl back to 1918, to a hundred newspaper and radio accounts of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, all laden with the most vivid descriptions of fighting in the bramble thicket, the steep valleys, the mud and barbed wire and the stinking death in which the 47 battle was fought. One journalist wrote that for weeks afterward, long after the Germans, Americans and French had left, no birds could be heard in those woods.

Earl, who was 48 when the Argonne was being contested, was not there, but his son was. His son who never came home. What did come home was a telegram so succinct and hard it could have been a note wrapped around a stone:

*War Department regrets to inform Corporal Robert Earl Lawrence killed in action in France.
Letter follows.*

With the telegram dangling loosely in his fingers, Earl had walked out to the weathered front porch of his house and cried until his legs gave out, then sank to his knees and fell over onto his back. He lay sobbing in that position for most of the afternoon, until Jesse found him by chance on a social visit. Thinking he had been injured, Jesse ran onto the porch and knelt beside him. He saw the telegram Earl held pressed to his chest, pulled it from Earl's grasp and read it. Bobby, as much a son as his own. Jesse lay his head down on Earl's chest and cried like he would die.

A letter from Bobby's commander arrived the day before Christmas with details and some compassion.

But nothing could resurrect Earl's spirit. Now, whenever Earl dealt with thicket undergrowth of any kind, or slogging through mud high on his boots, it primed his imagination in ways that put him into the Argonne forest, experiencing the fighting and the suffering death he feared had been his son's fate. Today, 17 years later, long after everyone told him Bobby had moved on to join Jesus in the clouds, Earl was still immersed in the final days and moments of Bobby's life in the longest, bloodiest battle Americans ever fought.

Earl sat in his wooden chair, looking blankly at the river as he spoke. "Bobby, best friends with your two sons... I could never get over to France to claim his body. War Department said many of them were unrecognizable, buried by the thick forest. By Christmas, the army stopped lookin'. As time went on, dog tags ended up bein' planted with the wheat. He died almost the last day of the war. Killed for nothin'. The war was over. *It was over! It was over!* God, what a damned mess."

Jesse maintained a respectful silence while the story played out, part of the price for the honor of being Earl's friend. It was a liturgy, Earl's eulogy for his son, forever, and a plaintive cry against war's waste, repeated at unexpected moments many times over the years. There was no way Jesse could utter a word or even move, or bait his hook during this. He sat, mindful of his role to just listen. Listen and wait for an opening in the dark clouds. After a long silence, while Earl sat wiping his eyes, and the only sounds were the faint ripple of water against the bank and the buzz of flies, Jesse reached down to fetch a beer from the can. He church-keyed it open, handed it to Earl.

Jesse began the process of extracting Earl from the Argonne and the brambles, and back to the everyday. "Ever wonder what Nacogdoches means?"

"Injin word."

"Ever'one knows that, but what's it mean? Tell you what it means in Injin language. It means 'place of the hairy armadillo.' Truth."

"No it don't."

"Gospel truth. And we got plenty of 'dillos 'round here. Makes a damn fine soup, ifin it don't give you the leprosy."

Earl looked up and seemed to realize he had let himself slide back into bottomless sorrow again, the kind there's nothing you can do about. Struggling to respond to Jesse's opening, he managed, "I'll say one thing for them Injins, they sure knew how to grow corn. Never had no leaf blight."

Earl downed the beer in three long pulls. He let out an enormous, unrestrained belch, worthy of having drained a can of Pearl. "Thanks. Guess I let myself go off again."

Jesse said nothing, watched both their lines for movement. He fiddled with the button on the bib pocket of his overalls and retrieved the square, flat plug of Red Man Chewing Tobacco that lived there. He broke off a pinch and stuffed it far back into his left cheek. Each one checked their bait, put fresh doughballs on the hooks and tossed them back in. The tobacco came due in Jesse's cheek and he leaned over to spit out the dark brown juice. The wad hit the dirt with the viscosity of motor oil, and a distinct plop. He wiped the excess off his beard and scratched his chin while he pieced his words together in his mind. "Had an interesting run-in with Bonnie and Clyde Barrow a couple years back."

"Gospel?"

"Gospel. My truck was broke, so I walked over to Andy's to pick up some bread, and see if he had any eggs. He did, so I bought four. Walk took me most of the morning; wanted to stock up."

"They rob the place?"

"Nope. They was parked out front. Clyde was in the car, and Bonnie was standing by the sody pop machine on the porch. I knew who they was; seen their pictures all over, at the bank... post office. As I was goin' in, she said, 'Pardon me, sir,' just as sweet and polite as anything. Not like a gangster. She asked me ifin I had two nickels on me for a couple of sody pops."

"You never have two nickels."

"I know, but that morning it happens I did. So I gave her my two nickels and she bought a couple bottles of Dr. Pepper, ice cold. She took one over to Clyde and he asked me if they could give me a ride to anywhere. I told 'em I live 'bout three miles, past the other side of town, and if that's too far, they don't have to take me. She said, 'That won't be no trouble at all.' So I bought my bread and eggs and got into the back seat. Just before they let me out at home, Bonnie reaches back and hands me a rolled up wad of \$1

bills. I didn't think to ask them why they didn't just go into the store, get change and buy the sody pops. But as I thought about it later, I think they didn't want to be recognized. Ifin I knew who they was, I imagine proolly ever'one did."

"How much money was it?"

"There was forty bills in the roll."

"Forty dollars?!"

"Yup, kept it in a box under the bed. Took me the better part of a year to spend it all."

Earl saw his line move and reeled in a ten-inch cat. "Looks like blues are bitin' this morning. Guess we'll see some flatheads later this month or next." He put it in the water pail beside his feet. "I ever tell you about the time I met Amelia Earhart?"

"No. The flyer?"

"Yup, came through here a while back. Landed in that patch out back of the barn."

"No way! Gospel?"

"Four square," Earl said, holding up his right hand. "Three or four years back. Outta nowhere, quiet at first. Then the airplane gets close and there's noise and dust everywhere. Cows scared half to death, like to folded up from fear."

"She landed an airplane? In your pasture? An airplane?"

"Floated outta the sky, circled around and set 'er down pretty as you please. Wheels like dragonfly legs, slicker'n shit on a shovel."

"Well, ain't that somethin'."

"She's lookin' at me through them goggles. Turns off the motor and gets out. Asks me how to git down to Port Arthur. I tell her it's that way, 'bout a day's drive in a car. We look at her Texaco map."

"She can just follow the roads."

"Well, there was a problem with a highway map. When she's flyin' she can't read the road signs, and the roads all look the same from up there. So she's thinking she could follow a river, if one goes there. I said well, head southwest. First river you'll come to is the Angelina, not very big. Take a left and follow it south. I told her all the rivers go south from here, and the Angelina is a good one. It gets bigger when it runs into the Neches. It winds all over itself, but will take you all the way down to Beaumont and Port Arthur at the Gulf."

"Lot quicker'n drivin'."

"She used the privy afore she took off. Cows come over, start nosin' around the airplane. You know how they are. Shooed 'em away. First time I seen an airplane that close. I got to touch the wings. Made her a sandwich to take along. Some of that smoked ham and soda bread, wrapped it in a clean bandana. She took it with her."

"Shoulda offered her some of your shine. Keep her warm while flyin'."

"Well, I did; I had some fresh jars. But she don't drink. Anyway got in the airplane and took off, headed for this river right here."

"Well don't that beat all? You coulda got your pitcher in the paper."

"Prolly coulda."

"Wonder why she was headed to Port Arthur?"

"Meetin' someone. To git money to fly 'round the world. That's what she said."

"Hope she found the river. Last time you made me a sandwich, I had to spit out the wood."

Morning came and went. Their lunch of fried chicken from Earl's Pauline went well with the soda bread

and cheese Jesse had brought, all washed down with cold Pearl. Jesse thought it would be hard to imagine a better place to be on earth than right here, on this bend in this river, fishing these fish. and he told Earl so. Earl engaged fully, his eyes bright. He nodded, said "Yup." He had two in the pail, and Jesse one, all blues, ready for cornmeal and frying.

Jesse spoke. "Found out my ex-wives have all been sending Christmas cards to each other."

"Hell, Jess, that's what you git for marryin' sisters."

"Guess so."

"What kinda damn fool would marry a woman, and when that was over, go and marry her sister?"

"Yeah, but - "

"And then after that was done, go and marry their other sister?"

"Well, they was all within easy reach."

"Their daddy woulda shot you ifin he hadn't been dead."

Earl gazed up at clouds beginning to thicken from the southwest. Having looked into the sky many times a day his entire life, he knew its moods like he knew his old friend. "Think we might git some rain later on?"

"I 'spect we will."

Jesse took his final pinch of Red Man for the day. Without another word, each stood and began packing up to go. They always tried to take everything up in one trip, but it always took two. "All takin' into account, we been fortunate to live in these times in the modern world," Jesse said as they walked up the hill. We seen a lot."

"Sure have," Earl nodded, "Ever'thing's already been invented."

Jesse added from out of nowhere, "Hey, know who made the best damn blackberry cobbler I ever ate in my life?"

"Who"s that ?"

"It was by-god Calamity Jane, up in Deadwood."

"Afore she was shot dead, I reckon," Earl surmised.

"I 'spect so," Jesse said.

Earl carried the day's catch up the slope to the car. The man with half his heart carved out smiled and then chuckled his first chuckle of the day. Likely his first of the month.