

You, Mud Child.

They had seen dry summers, of course, but never like this. Riverwood white on the dry banks like mammoth bones unearthed. Straining in his booster seat, Jordan could see them as they bridged over the dwindling creek and riverbeds.

“Dad,” he had said. “More dinosaur skeletons!”

Scott Caperton could only just hear his youngest son for the sound of the road. In the rearview, the boy’s eyes wet with wonder.

He remembered tracking the boy’s gaze, a quick glance beyond the passenger glass to the world beyond. Hostile in the heat, alien almost. The world a tinderbox smearing past.

“Do you think it will rain tomorrow?” he had asked.

Tomorrow..

The cursor blinked on his screen as he fought back from the memory of the day before. Spread on his desktop was the usage dictionary he was supposed to be proofing when he drifted.

That extra period.

Tomorrow.

He relaxed into his chair. The world beyond his office windows bright and still. A painful light. The trees frozen in the desiccation, leaves flagging and limp with no breeze to stir them. A thin path winding the dead fieldgrass. Dust upon it all. “No bud,” he said to the room. “I don’t think it’s going to rain tomorrow.”

Upon the path a figure appeared, blue shirted and lank. Jordan, his youngest. Barefoot, he heron-stepped over rocks until he hit the yard, then broke into a sprint. He burst through the backdoor breathless in a haze of brown talc.

“Everything good?”

Grasping his side, he licked the dust from his lips. “I got my line tangled.”

“Well, sounds to me like you need to get it untangled.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I tried. Guess I’ll go try again.” And he was gone, leaving behind a boy-shaped swirl of dust.

Jessica’s footsteps in the kitchen, her face appeared, leaning into the doorframe. “I just hear Jordan?”

“Yeah, asked me to untangle his line.”

“He asked you to go with him this morning.”

“I know.”

“You said yes.”

“I know.”

“He asked you to go yesterday.”

“Yes. Yes. I know. I’m not happy about it either.”

“What will you say if he asks you tomorrow?”

“Same thing I said today. Deadline.”

She stepped into his office, paced the wall of windows, stopped behind the computer chair. “He’s got your fishing pole.”

He stood, and there was Jordan, perched atop an exposed root on the bank of the dry creek bed, arms up, mid-cast. He hadn’t been able to see with the view blocked by his work. The child and his dust double wavering in the heatrise. A still life in oils: dry reds, browns, touches here and there of an arid green. The scene broke as the boy threw the line forward.

“I’ve got to get back to work, hon.” he said.

She smiled, touched his shoulder, and was gone.

Pulling the office chair, Scott sat down in front of Tomorrow. ‘Pg. 332,’ he added to the note then highlighted the offending double-period in the book.

Minutes passed. An hour. When he glanced back, Jordan was swiping the air trying to catch his swinging hook. He shot out a hand, traced the arc of it back, reached out, fingers grasping at air, lost his footing on the tree limb. He oared for balance with his free hand then fell out of sight into the dusty slough.

The man shook his head.

What am I going to do with you, simple child?

The computer screen went dark, he jiggled the mouse.

Tomorrow stared, the deadline always looming. Never time enough for him. He paged over, began reading.

Will it rain tomorrow?

Will you have time for me tomorrow?

And he realized then that he had not been anything for his youngest son that the boy could not get from the pages of the dictionary spread before him.

Simple? Try another word, turn a few pages forward: sympathy. Empathy, even. You know the usages and etymology of the word Father yet you know not how to be. Start with the phonemes, work your way up. You know him. You were him. You, mud child, with your stutter and the bugs you befriended and the water you explored. Kingfisher and heronflight and even though you did not know their names you knew their beauty as something profound. Tomorrow will not do. Look up.

And he did, stood from his chair in time to see Jordan hauling back on the pole, reeling on the downstroke like he had been taught.

“Gonna break the line,” he said to the room.

But the boy kept pulling back, kept spinning. He glanced toward the house, panic plain upon his face. Hawing the rod’s straining arc over his left shoulder he let it dip for a moment of rest, looked once more toward the house, his panic turned to a sobbing terror.

On the back porch Scott could hear the boy keening. “Dad?” he said. “Dad? What do I do? What do I do?” Approaching, the man could see the boy’s face was wet with exhaustion, tears mudrun down the

dust that caked the whole of him. Eyes closed against the strain, he gave a tug on the pole and it fought, pulling him off the root into the creek bed. “Dad?” he said again, turning his mouth over his shoulder.

“You alright?”

“Dad? I need help.”

“Bud, your line is just caught. Walk it in.”

He dug his heels, stared up at Scott with stony alarm, and the line jerked, pulling him a foot upcreek. Fresh sweat in a slurry above his eyebrows, he reeled, pulled back. Manfaced and serious, he steadied his voice. “Dad, I’m not playing. I need help.” Pulling against the outreel, he dug his feet inches into the hardpan.

Just as the man dropped into the creek bed the line jerked the boy hard enough to pull him out of his stuck shoes into the air then flat on his belly. Sputtering in the dust he tried to get his feet underneath him but another jolt flung his arms forward and he slid arms-forward, flying through the dirt like a filth covered superman. The man caught up, shot his arm into the slack seat of the boy’s pants, pulled him upright. Steady, with the boy locked in the surround of his arms, the man added his hand onto the rod. Heaving back, they shared a moment of awe at the strength of whatever the boy had hooked.

“Reel. Reel,” the man said.

The boy did.

“Let it run. Alright pull on three. One. Two. Three.”

Again, the pullback, Jordan reeling. Again, the slack.

“I think it’s getting tired,” Jordan said.

“Me too. You ready? One. Two. Three.” They threw the line back. “Less pull that time.”

“Yeah.”

“You want to walk it?”

“Ok.”

“Reel in as we walk. Watch your step.”

Winding, the boy walked ahead of him. By the time they reached an upstream low water bridge the fight had all but gone out of the line. They stood upon the bridge just staring as the cord bellied to the dirt, drew taught for a thrummed instant, fell again.

Cypress knees. A single sycamore for shade. The day boiling soundlessly around them.

Jordan raised his hand to wipe his eyes. Gazed down the lane toward the log house there. "Think Grandpa is playing a trick on us?"

"Too elaborate for Grandpa. Let's walk it."

He led the way, winding and winding till just before a downed tree he froze.

"What is it, bud?"

He hiked one leg over the tree, the other, then stooped to gather what he had seen.

"I told you it was just—"

"No. Dad. Look," he said as he turned. What he held within his arms was a sort of wriggling gold. A fish that spanned his shoulder-breadth. Wild eyes rolling, it twisted, went still.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Some kind of Carp, I think."

Wrestling against the torsion, he lifted the creature to eye level. Scaled in bronze it shone like sunstruck honey. "I think it's looking at me."

"Yeah, it's probably terrified. Let's try to find some mud to bury him in."

"Can I put it down? My arms are getting tired."

"Yeah. Be easy."

He did, easing the fish down atop the dirt with a tenderness the man did not expect. "Will he be okay?"

"I don't know, bud. Let's try to find some mud."

They walked in opposite directions, eyes cast down to the dirt at their feet. "There's some up here!" The boy called.

"That the clay pit?"

“Yep.”

They gathered two handfuls of slime each and walked back to where the fish lay gasping. The man smeared one side, Jordan the other. “Be gentle,” the man said. “Try not to get any in its gills.”

Jordan stopped, bent low, swept his muddied fingers along the creature’s heaving sides. “What gills?” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t see any.”

Taking a knee to feel along the fish’s sides, the man looked bewildered. “Well. I. You’re right.” he said, easing onto the ground. “Even mudskippers have gills. Weird.”

“What should we do with it, Dad?”

The man stared. The fish-thing stared back. “Nothing much we can do except put it in the clay pit and pray for rain.”

“What about the pool?”

“Chlorine would probably kill it.”

“Alright,” Jordan said. “Can I carry him to the pit?”

“It’s your catch.”

Kneeling slow, the boy’s hands hesitated over the creature’s panting as if he might clasp them together in prayer. “I’m going to pick you up now,” he said. Climbing to his feet, he lifted it with reverence and stepped slow toward the sludge, where he stooped once more to let it roll out of his arms. They watched as the fish frothed deeper into the murk.

“Will that be good?”

“It’s the best we can do for him.”

“Okay.”

“Not as pretty with all that mud on, is it?”

Jordan didn’t answer, just stared down into that gawping gold.

“Let’s get back,” Scott said. “Want me to carry the pole?”

“Nah.”

Halfway down creek they found the boy’s stuck shoes and the furrows left by the dragging of his body in the dirt. Jordan turned to look back, froze. “Dad.”

And there it was, the fish, following them with a sort of waddling jump from fin-tip to fin-tip. As it neared, they could hear its exhalation with every scootch forward. Mweep. Mweep. Mweep, it said as it caught up, then woggled to a stop next to Jordan’s feet.

“What does it want?”

“I don’t know, bud.”

“Will it follow us home?”

It stared up at them with a strange ichthyic expectation.

“I think it might.”

And it did. Mweeping beside Jordan’s outstep, it dogged them all the way up to the porch steps where it attempted a little fishy push up, wriggled in a circle, and lifted upon its front fins to stare at the two of them standing on the porch.

“It wants to come in.” Jordan said.

“Yep.”

“Can I—”

“Hose him off first,” the man said, turning toward the door, when a shadow reflected in the door-glass caught his eye. From over the horizon, a crawling bulb in charcoal grey bullied the blue from the sky. A rumble crawled toward them over the shivering treetops. He saw his own reflection crooked against the mirrored sky. Grey eyes, grey beard, a stranger.

Awake.

How many months have I been asleep? How many years?

“Make it quick, bud,” he called down to Jordan who was pulling up on the spigot handle.

He looked up. The man pointed.

“Rain,” the boy marveled.

By the time Jordan made it into the house the wind was alive in the fieldgrass and sawtooth shifting the tree-line against the grey of the sky. A single drop against the porchwood. Another. "Here it comes," the man said, lifting the boy and his fish so they could see out of the backdoor window. And in an instant of white noise the sky let down some backlogged months of rain in a wall of grey that slammed against the cracked Earth.

They watched for a long time. Neither spoke. The fish did not speak.

Footsteps behind them broke the spell.

"Got dark," Emma said from the living room. They heard the tinkling of a pull chain and a light came on somewhere behind them, hazing the windows and deluge beyond. Emma stepped up next to her husband, cupped her hand against the glass. Lightning froze the rain in its falling. Night-black to daylight then back.

The lights flickered then died.

"There goes the deadline," the man said.

"Welp," Emma said, staring out into the sheets of falling grey. "I'll get some candles."

He turned back. "Hey, hon?"

"Yeah?"

"Grady and David inside?"

"Videogames."

"Emily?"

"Her room."

"Alright. Tell them that if they want to see the creek wash, they better get in here."

Again, Emma's feet soft on the living room carpet.

"Can I put you down?" the man said.

"I think the fish wants to watch."

"I'll get you a chair to stand on."

Grabbing a chair from the kitchen, Scott scootched it against the backdoor, lifted the boy and his friend into it. Jessica returned with an armful of candles, David and Grady mere smudges following behind. Eyes first out of the dim, they moved together into the office to sit on the window seat.

She struck a match, lowered it to a wick. Walked the kitchen and living room touching the flame to tealights. Finished, she returned with the taper, held it out for the man to take. Heaving back in alarm, she bounced the lit candle stickwise from hand to hand, bent to pick it's clattering from the floor. "What the heck is that?" she said.

The man turned. Jordan turned. Blood red gleaming in the candlelight. The boy lifted the fish for her to see, said, "I caught a fish."

She inched forward, lowered the candle to fish eye-level. Bronze as she stepped closer, its dorsal fin tinsel in gold. "Is it alive?"

"Yep."

"A fish? Can we see?" said Grady.

"Here comes the wash," Scott said, but they had all made a circle around the thing in the floor.

Mweep, said the fish.

"Don't poke it." Jordan said.

"It stinks."

"No, it doesn't."

Alone at the windows the man watched the pebbles and stones and limbs and tree trunks and forty tomorrows worth of water crash toward the house and then past. Water upon water within water.

The ceaseless flow of it. Never time enough to pull my head free. Well, how about now? Right now?

Looks like you got your rain, bud.

"What was that?" Jess asked.

I turned to find them all cross-legged, giggling as the fish spun and waddled between them.

Look then, mud child. Here is the tomorrow you had asked for. The flood of their tomorrows. Can you see it?

A knock against the backdoor. Jess and David scabbled into the kitchen. Jordan scooped the fish and stood. Clambering onto the window seat, Grady craned to see.

They could see nothing but darkness runneling down the glass. Scott reflexively palmed the switch for the porchlight. “Duh,” he said. Leaning in, he cupped his hands to block out the candlelight. Lightning flash and a riptrail of blue in the sky illuminated the scene. Stood on the back porch were three men in yellow rainslickers, wind whipping their hoods, their sleeves. The rightmost held a rope that trailed off the porch into wet nonexistence.

Scott opened the door, shouted, “What do you want?”

Another zigzag crackled overhead, lighting the leading man with pale intensity. Grey beard, grey eyes. A familiar face.

“Dad?” Scott said.

The man in yellow stepped forward to be heard. “I’m sorry to startle.” His accent strange, unplaceable. “You have my, how you say, uh.” He turned back to his friends for help. Finding none, he turned back. “It does not translate.”

“Dog?” said the man in back.

“Yes. Dog. You have my dog.”

“We don’t have a dog here.”

“Storm broke our, uh.” He turned for help again. “Our, uh. Again, it does not translate.”

“Fence?” said the man in back.

“Fence! Yes. Our dog get loose. We follow here.”

“We don’t have your dog.”

“Yes, you have my dog. David, bring the mother.”

The man hauled at the rope, its trailing end bobbing as the dog bounced up the stairs.

MWEEP MWEEP MWEEP, the dog said. And Scott could see its gleam even in the lowlight. Pigsized and scaled in sunshine it stood gasping in the downpour, the giant fish gave a faint glow that illuminated the man it had waddled up to. Another familiar face.

“Jordan?” Scott called over his shoulder. “Bring the fish.”

The boy appeared in the doorway.

Mweep, said the fish in his arms.

MWEEP, said the larger on the porch.

“See?” the man in yellow said, sweeping his hand. “Baby dog. Needs mother.”

Jordan looked from Scott to the man, then stepped out into the rain.

“Jordan will carry it,” the man said, bowing aside as the third man stepped forward.

The boy gawped up into the shadows of the man’s hood, lifted the fish-dog into the man’s outstretched arms. More lightning, more clarity, the third face also familiar. Startled by the thunderclap, Jordan scrambled back inside.

“Thanks you,” the man said as he backed away. “We are to go home now.”

“Wait,” Scott said after them.

The men halted, the now-slowing rain pittering against their hoods.

“Where are you from.”

“Oh. Umm. Near. We are, hmm, uh,” he shook his head in frustration. “It does not translate.”

“Neighbors,” said from just out of sight.

“Ahh. Yes. Neighbors! We are neighbors. Goodnight neighbor.”

And they were gone.

And so was the rain.

And Scott turned to find tomorrow staring up at him from eight eyes full of wonder.