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My Life
Among the Electric
Tower Giants

The Canoe

The old man and I shoved off in the wooden canoe he had made with his own bare hands some two decades earlier. It was hunter green and its thick translucent coat of sealant gleamed in the sunlight of that early October morning. He was smoking his clay pipe, his pant legs cuffed up above his pale and hairless knees; and he stood shin deep in the river guiding with his hands the canoe from the riverbank into the water.

We were going on an expedition; he'd told me that morning when he came into my bedroom, awaking me before the sun had even risen. I walked with him out to the old wooden barn at the back of our family's land. Even in his winter years, the old man still strode high on his heels, and I had to trot just to keep up. He was walking out ahead of me, even though he'd given me the responsibility of carrying the electric lantern.

He did not need the light. He knew this land by heart. A good thing, since my youthful uneasy steps across the rugged field sent the flashlight's beam arcing about spasmodically. Swinging to and fro across the tufts of dead dry hay.

Inside the barn, among outmoded antique farm tools, old broken pieces of furniture, and other bits of trash that had piled up over the years, was the canoe. It sat resting atop two saw horses covered in a canvass tarp.

"Okay, boy," he said to me, crouching down so that his already hunched back took on the appearance of a drawn bow. "I think I'm gawna need some help. I'm not so young no more, and I don' know if I kin lift it down to the river myself."

"Okay," I said. I knew I was small, but I pulled up all the strength I could inside of me, ready to supply the old man with all the help I could.

"Watch out," he said to me before pulling the canoe off the sawhorses. He let one end come to rest on the ground, then spun the boat upside down, hefting the end he'd been holding up upon his crooked shoulders.

He stepped backward until his back was at the canoe's center of gravity; it teetered precariously upon his shoulders.

"Alright, boy," he said. "Get the door."

We walked together, out of the barn and across our family's land, down into the woods that stood beside the river. A flat gray light had begun to bleed over the hills, and everywhere was fog and gray. In the distance, upon the hilltops, the row of electrical towers stood; an insult to the halcyon dawn.

I didn't help much, just tipped the posterior end of the boat up off the ground times when it began to drag behind the old man. It was not a quick walk to the river, and when we finally got to the water's edge.

The old man had to sit down for some time, huffing and heaving to catch his breath. Fog rolled off his broad bent shoulders, like steam off a cup of hot coffee. When he finally caught his breath, he pulled out his clay pipe and began to smoke.

We rolled down stream until midmorning. He'd given me an oar, which had been strapped down inside the canoe, and he took one for himself. I was too small to really paddle, but I swatted at the water as we moved down river, convinced I was propelling the entire canoe with my strokes. The old man sat at the back, rowing steadily. Switching back and forth between sides.

It was I who spotted the little island, and when I did I shouted out "Land Ho!"

And the old man smiled, and said, "Well, I'll be. I guess we'd better stop and claim it."

On the island, the old man pulled an apple from the pocket of his pants; he rubbed it with his handkerchief and gave it to me.

We named the island "Blackberry Island," after the blackberry bushes that cluttered its tiny shores. The old man sat and smoked a bit, and I collected blackberries, until finally he called me to his side.

"Your folks are dead," he said to me. "Do you understand what that means?"

I shook my head I didn't.

"They're gone boy. You won't see them again."

Then we just sat there for a while, eating the blackberries I had picked, and watching the cormorants dive down through the waters surface, and a slate gray egret slowly stalking beside the cattail marshes.

It wasn't long after that day before the old man too had passed away. My aunt from Maine came and took me away in her car, and the men from the town sold the farm to the electric company.

Years later, when I finally returned, a power plant sat where the trees had been, and a large parking lot, weed-ridden and in disrepair lay where the old barn had once stood.

I bought a small house, down the road from where my family's land had been, and I set to work constructing a canoe of my own. I am no craftsman, and the work was difficult and disheartening.

After a few years of false starts, and failures, I finally finished the boat. I placed it in the back of my truck and drove down to the lot near the power plant.

I rode down the river slowly, paddling at the back of the canoe, as I'd seen my grandfather do so many years ago. I searched for Blackberry Island, but it was no longer there. I assumed it had been swept over by the river's waters now brown and murky with industrial effluence.

I rode the river down to its mouth where it poured listlessly into the Atlantic. All the way down the electrical towers followed me, peeked their steel shoulders up above the late summer treetops, motionless, silent.

When I reached the ocean, I paddled myself to shore. I pulled the canoe up upon the beach and sat down in the sand beside it. And I watched the cormorants diving for fish, and the egrets wading atop submerged sandbars.