

the surface. An old man stops us. The lake's frozen over. I can see Mike on the other side. He hands the guy some really long receipt. "Oh, okay," the guy says and we walk right through.

Mike's got a car. I don't know from where. I don't ask. At home we look at the goods. He stole stuff with high resale value — ratchet sets and handsaws, breadmaker and fancy Krups coffee machines, a stereo and VCR. Me, I stole toilet paper, a cooking pot, a dictionary, some tomato sauce.

"You've gotta think big," Mike coaches me.

But I can't. That's my problem. It's some sort of disorder that my world is so small. I look down, there's my feet. I look up, there's my eyelids.

Next morning I wake up and Mike's gone and so's my watch and so's this story. I spend the next couple of weeks trying to figure out what time it is and trying to remember how this story went. Then I find out Mike's dead. Some guy at the bus station told me. I don't believe him. For all I know Mike started the rumor himself, just so I'd end this story with him being dead. He's not particularly subtle, you know. But then I run into a mutual friend behind the old warehouse laying pennies on the train track. He's making remembrances of Mike, he says. And it gets me thinking 'cause it's not like Mike to get this consistent in a lie.

A few months go by. I still don't believe it, but I can't sleep. So I go to the park to watch the sunrise. I don't know what time it is but it's fizzy in the sky. I climb up on the jungle gym and sit on the 100% safe, rickety wooden bridge. Somewhere along the line I really miss those metal monkey bars of my youth. If you fell, you broke your arm. The peril was real. And I'm looking around at all the pretend perils of the playground. We're totally ruining our nation's children. They'll never know how to survive.

And there, leaning against the rubber seated, rubber matted, buckle yourself in safely, heaven help you you should experience one moment of fear in your life, swing sets, is a bum. Like a for-real bum. Grubby beard, layers of clothes, facing East, waiting for the sunrise.

I know there's an aesthetic philosophy in here somewhere. Or maybe a moral. All I can think about is that story I read once about Diogenes. How Diogenes gave it all up except for a loin cloth and a cup to drink from. Then one day he's down by the river and sees a boy drinking from his joined hands. Diogenes throws away his cup and declares, "I have been shamed."

And I watch the sun rise along the bum's body, over his throat and up his face, until he's covered with sun and closes his eyes.

Diogenes searched with a lantern for an honest man.

I never stole a lantern.

And I never felt like looking.

Freezing Rain

James Ladd Thomas

John Weaver stood in deathly cold water up to his waist. He was in the middle of the Alabama River, 40 miles from his parents' home in Wetumpka, Alabama, on a Saturday morning watching the first splinters of light shoot from the eastern sky. The time, he guessed, near six a.m. and he whispered to himself, "Can it get any worse?"

He had been out the night before until one a.m. with Paula Vaughan, a girl he had known less than a week. He met her Tuesday night at a party in the woods where people were dropping acid and burning furniture for a bonfire, his second night of Christmas vacation from the University of Alabama. They had gone to a movie, then over to her folks' house, down to their basement, a place that as he stood shivering in the life numbing river showed signs of holiness. He wanted to be in that basement this very moment, lying on that long black and white couch, under two quilts with the warmth of Paula Vaughan's naked body seeping into his. He wanted to be kissing Paula Vaughan's neck, her beautiful flat stomach, her breasts that, as he stood in the frigid water, were quickly becoming his reason for living. He was 21, three years into a degree in U.S. history, and five days into a resubmersion in his family's life.

He and his father had driven to the river with Donny, his sister's husband. They had unloaded the small boat from the top of his father's Bonneville, carried it to the edge of the river, not really a boat launch, just a spot that Donny had learned from one of his construction buddies, then attached the small motor, gas tank, thrown in the life vests in almost complete darkness, the only sources of light two 9-volt flashlights. All three had then put on their chest high waders, stepped into the shallows of the river with crusts of ice on the edge, then John and Donny eased into the small boat, Donny choosing to steer the small out-board motor. Before they took off for the small island located in the east side of the river, John's father handed him his shotgun and one of the flashlights.

"Now remember, when you see us heading across the river turn on the light so we can find our way to you," his father told him.

Once out in the water John's bitterness over hunting before daylight in this cold only intensified. The water was choppy, almost too choppy for the small boat to maneuver across the river, and the wind, which was blowing against them as they crossed, felt like razor blades thrown in his face. Paula Vaughan's lips flooded John's thoughts as the two men bounced and bounced towards the island. They were full lips, lips which had a purpose for more than shaping the sounds out of her mouth. Though he had his collar turned up and his head mostly down, John thought his face was

close to freezing. When he tried to move his mouth his muscles seemed to not respond.

If he had been allowed a vote, he would not be in this boat bucking through the icy water and frigid air. When his father came down the hallway and knocked on his bedroom door to awaken him at 3:30 a.m. he would have just said, "I think I'll pass today." But he didn't, because he had at the last minute canceled a fishing trip his father had planned in the fall, a Saturday trip when he had come home for a weekend visit. He had understood the depth of his father's disappointment. His father was trying to make amends since walking out on his family three years ago for another woman, actually the next-door neighbor, the

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wife of his father's best friend. John's mother and older sister had walked around for weeks in a daze, but eventually they reshuffled their lives, gathered themselves. The father had returned last year, showing up one Saturday after-

noon explaining his mistake and begging for forgiveness from John's mother. Standing in the kitchen doorway, John would never forget watching his father cry while slumping over in his chair with his head face down on the mauve and white rag place mat John's mother had made the year before.

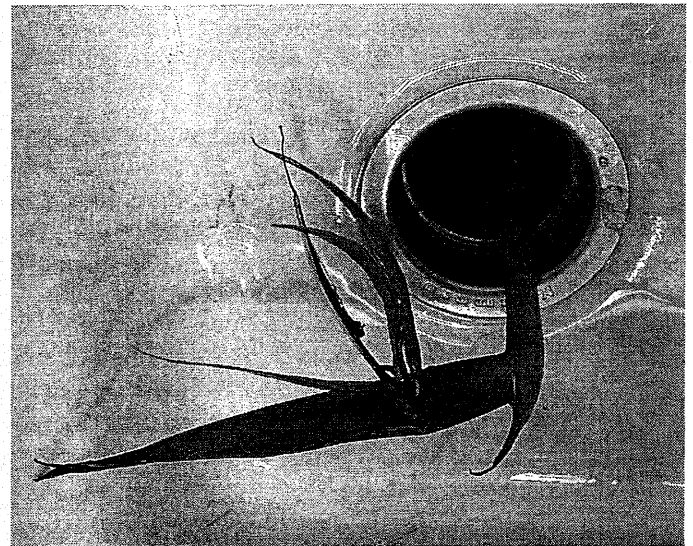
Donny dropped him off at the island, handing him the gun and flashlight and giving him a wink. "We'll be back in a couple of days to pick you up," he said.

John laughed.

He stood in the water with his back to the wind, in the area at the southern tip of the island, where the ducks and geese would come swirling in for their landings. Though the darkness was still prevalent, the dawn had grown enough to reveal the outlines of the giant cooling towers of the nuclear power plant that was located a couple of miles downriver. He looked at the giant cones casting their outlines in the morning sky. He felt fear, danger, that somehow being this close to such a huge and powerful man-made landscape was not right, but he also felt the purity of Paula Vaughan's breasts, breasts he had been caressing and kissing only a few hours before. This combination of these polar emotions and the icy water and wind created a rather strange and ominous excitement. He thought of how such small moments were what we always remembered.

He heard the pattering of the small motor making its way to the island. He turned and saw Donny and his

father were a third of the way across the river. He flipped on his flashlight, waving it as if signaling for help. His father waved their light. A few seconds more and they were close to the halfway point, but suddenly he saw his father's hunting cap blow off his head and fall into the river. Donny, seeing the cap blow off and into the water, made a sharp right turn, a turn his father had not expected. The father was quickly thrown over the side and, in what seemed like two seconds, disappeared. The father falling and sinking had panicked Donny; he jerked the handle of the motor in the opposite direction, flipping the boat up but not over. Donny toppled out, and like John's father, vanished within seconds as the waders filled with water. With the empty boat pattering down river, the frigid wind slicing through John's body, the honks of the ducks and geese dropping from the angelic blue sky, the morning sun divinely glowing off the giant cooling cones, and Paula Vaughan's breasts quickly fading from the moment, a new day dawned in John Weaver's life.



SINKING PARADISE by christopher m.