

Indiana, Summer, 1984

-Michael Bogan

You are thinking now of a summer in Indiana, of a time when you were nine years old, rail-thin and pale, the youngest in a family that was then still whole. You were youth-bliss, youth-ignorant, but a widening vessel quietly accumulating all the worries of all the adults that circled you. That summer the weekends were spent in a cabin on the banks of Sugar Creek, one cabin among an entire row of cabins, twenty yards apart, all solidly lower-middle class, rough-shod, with no running water, no heat. Some—like yours—stood up on brick stilts to guard against the spring floods. The families that spent weekends here were Catholics, fastidiously Irish, who stayed here two, maybe three weekends each month. These were hard-scrabble families: union men in their thirties or early forties with now non-existent jobs, who sent their children to *Holy Cross* or *St Therese the Little Flower* schools. These families pulled up to their cabins, Friday late afternoons, and the kids piled out, swung open the back doors of their station wagons or pickup trucks, and wrestled out their bicycles, soon skidding away down the dirt road that joined all the cabins, to see who else was here, how high the corn had grown, how high the creek had risen. While the kids biked away the fathers hauled in the coolers and the paper grocery bags stuffed with a weekend's worth of cabin clothes, then hauled out and gassed up the Sears push mowers. They mowed the yards wearing jeans and flannel shirts, until they started sweating under the tilting sun, then discarded the flannels for white t-shirts underneath. They pushed their mowers down each row, once with the

mower tilted on its back wheels at a 45-degree angle, then again over the same path with the mower level to the ground, the only way to burrow through the weeks of overgrowth. While they mowed, the mothers, wearing jeans and t-shirts and cross necklaces, worked inside the cabins, unpacking the coolers, the Velveeta and hot dogs, filling the cabinets with white boxes of Little Debbie's, lining against the wall the milk jugs filled with water. They brought in the pillows and quilts and spread them over the loft or the couches where the children would sleep (only the parents slept on beds here, the cabins too small to hold beds for children). They swept the mouse droppings and dead click-beetles out of the kitchen and sent them arcing out the front door, wiped the paper-light and rigormorted bees off the counters, propped open the windows to air out the stale smells of fish, wet worms, smoldering campfires. While they cleaned they listened to the radios that sat in the window sills, to the sounds of Elvis, or the Indianapolis 500, or WIBC AM talk radio. The older teenage kids slouched out of the cars and huddled together, outside the cabins, smeared black shoe polish under their eyes, wore torn camouflage jackets and belts that hung *Rambo* knives (jagged blades with compasses glued on top, waterproof matches and sutures and needles hidden inside the hollow handle). After a few minutes of low talking, the teenagers disappeared into the darkening woods half a mile down the creek, playing their grown-up game of Vietnam.

Grasses mowed, the fathers moved to new chores that had appeared since their last visit—removing a hornet's nest from the front-door eaves or clearing deadfall from the roof. Or the fathers, finishing their chores early, might settle into fishing, sticking a hook through a night-crawler, casting into the dusky water, resting the pole on the crook of a y-shaped stick in the muddy bank, popping a beer. Here they found solitude; quietly

staring off at the green water, then at a hawk perched on a branch across the creek, then again at the mirrored water where the fishing line broke the surface in miniature ripples. They would rest like this, hanging an arm off a lawn chair, fingertips brushing the fishing line where it exited the reel, waiting for that tug. And when they felt that tug, they'd snatch up the pole and reel in a small-mouth bass, or pissed-off catfish, or most often just a sunfish. Once or twice a summer a father would drag up a snapping turtle, so heavy it bent the fishing pole to where the tip nearly touched the base, and then he'd whoop and holler for the little kids to hurry come see, then he'd cut off the head of the turtle with a pocket knife, nail the head to a tree, and start counting how many hours—8?, 10?, 12?—the head would continue to snap before it finally gave up and died.

The children, returned from their bike tour, took up the call to swim. They ran into their cabins and searched through the piles of sour creek-shoes stacked just inside the doors. Always they had to wear the creek shoes—too many hooks and wheel jacks and clipped pieces of barbed wire half-buried in the creek bed, anxious for bare feet. Always the searching through the pile of various sizes and colors and shapes, every shoe crispy and faded by the repeated wet and dry cycle of the creek water, the laces so compressed there was never a hope of untying them, so the children just jammed in their feet as hard as they could until the feet crammed themselves into place, then the children ran from their cabins and hurled their bodies off the bank and into the water. Or when they were brave enough—which was sometimes but not always—they ran to the rope swing tied to the tree that slanted from the creek bank, where they swung out in a wide arc then dropped at the arc's peak down hard into the water, but never sank, because they wore the orange life jackets that weighed heavy as cement when wet but somehow still floated.

They laughed when they hit the water, nervous, thankful the life jacket floated, then dog paddled to the shore and crawled back through the muck to climb and swing again. But after just a few turns the sun was now setting, the creek turning from green, to dark green, to a deep violet that matched the evening clouds. The mothers came out from the cabins and called the children inside for dinner. The children ran to their cabins, tossing life jackets and shoes outside the door, finding sandwiches on the picnic table inside, Wonder Bread, Carl Budding turkey lunch meat, Miracle Whip, all spread out on paper plates over a plastic table cloth each mother would clean with a single swipe of her rag.

And now arrives the true evening, the dusk deeply settling. The mothers have washed and packed the dishes into the cabinets, and now stand outside on the front steps wiping wet hands on their jeans. The fathers have come out, too. One of them—your father—lights a campfire in the large pit that sits central to all the cabins. The flames glow brighter with each moment against the failing sky. One by one the other families wander over with their lawn chairs and coolers of beers. Your brother is here, too; your sisters are here, too. The night settles in: the creek lapping against the bank, the frogs' low belching, the cicadas, crickets, katydids with their trice and quad calls, all washing into one background *whirr*, the laughter of a family three cabins away who arrived late and just finished eating dinner, the dishes clanking from their window, their radio playing. The fire crackles. Someone thrushes along the thistle and itchweed path that connects your cabin lot to the next. A child throws a paper plate onto the fire and everyone watches as it curls and reddens, catches fire in a burst of flame, and turns slowly to ash. Your father lights a cigarette; the brick-layer from the cabin next door drinks a can of beer. The brick-

layer, a union man with five kids, strong forearms and loud voice, once told you he turned the Ram hood ornament around on his truck, so that instead of facing the road, the ram's horns now charged the driver, a continuous reminder that it was the bank that owned the truck, not him.

Always still on evenings like this, even now when you are older and alone, you smell the *Off*—so sticky on your neck, your forearms, your socks, where your mother over-sprayed you to guard against the ticks and mosquitoes and chiggers. Always you taste the bitterness left on your lips when you forgot you had been sprayed and wiped the hot dog ketchup from your mouth with the back of your coated hand.

The flames stretch up into the night. Emboldened by the light the parents laugh harder, talk louder, using harsh, rough words you understand now that you are nine: bastard and payment and piss and *that Mondale*. A forced current dominates the conversation, but after a time, food and beer settling, the current eases. The adults, half-drunk, shake off the week's burdens. One father finishes a Stroh's, sighs, crinkles the can, and tosses it into the fire. One father swings his wife in a circle, and everyone laughs. The brick-layer remembers from somewhere *And the gobble-uns 'll git you ef you don't watch out!* and the other parents smile. *I remember that*, one says. A poem they all had to memorize in grade school. And they drink more, together trying to remember, laughing at their mistakes in the stanzas, then in unison, louder, with the chorus, *And the gobble-uns 'll git you ef you don't watch out!* One of the other children arrives with long wooden sticks with forks tied to their ends. *Let's go gig frogs at the pond*, he says, and you ask your father if you can go. He looks at you with kind glazed eyes and says *sure*, and with the other children you leave the fire. Within a few steps you are consumed by

the dark, the whispering corn stalks, the cast blackness of a cloudy night, the dark vacuums where clumpings of trees once stood, all terrifying. But the other kids are laughing, so you ignore your fears and run fast, as fast as you can, to the nearby frog pond, where you suddenly slow and push through the weeds to the edge of the water. There you prowl gently along the sinking mud, tracing the croaks of a frog, your shoes sticking and slurping with every step, until you discover the source of the croaks, flip on your flashlight, shine the beam into the frog's bulged and now paralyzed eyes, and spear the frog's wet body with the gig. Once, twice, each child sticks a frog with a *splat*, then you parade back to the fire, holding the gigs high with frogs impaled as trophies, and you cook them there, the frog skin shrinking and crackling over the flames, then you eat their niblets of legs as the fathers look on proud and amused. *I used to gig frogs*, one father says, *but once when I stuck one it cried like a baby, sounded exactly like one of my kids. I never could do it again...*

Now the pearl-blue dark of night, the gigs put away, the marshmallows put away, the voices quieter. The youngest children are taken inside the cabins to sleep. But you are older now, and you are allowed to stay up late, to listen to the adults as long as you sit still. You curl in a chair, alone and sleepy. Their words mix with your half-dreams; their cursing and laughing, now rising, now hushed. Quietly, new noises begin mixing with their words, small distant noises, sounding from the darkness that you understand is the flowing water of the creek but in the night just can't be sure. You hear not just the water rippling, but behind that some other sound—one that must be the splashing of a beaver, or a turtle, but also could mean something else: the cautious steps of something stalking up the creek bed, not just an older child dared to scare you, but something creepier and

more breathless than anything you have actually known—but must not exist, because no parent turns to see what shadow comes sloshing up the creek, no flashlight is pulled from a pocket to search the banks. You leave your chair for your father's and stand next to him, lean against his shoulder, stay there for a time.

The parents grow quieter, the night and beer coming down. Long profound moments of time pass when no one speaks. A child yawns. Your mother comes to you, it's time for bed. Inside the cabin, your parents lead you and your brother and your sisters up to the loft your father has built, sheets of plywood covered in army-green cushions and blankets and pillows. Your mother covers you with quilts and touches your forehead.

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,
To whom God's love commits me here,
Ever this night be at my side,
To light and guard, and rule and guide
God bless Mom, Dad, Pat, Cristi, Colleen, me, and everyone else in the whole
wide world, amen.*

You are kissed goodnight, your mother and father descend to their bed below. A quiet string of moments pass. Your brother is sleeping; your sisters are sleeping. You smell the campfire still on your shirt and in your hair. You are falling asleep to the distant conversation of the remaining adults sitting at the fire, now either drunk to a quiet stupor or sobering before they stumble back to their cabins; first a small group is talking, then just three or four, now only two in quiet conversation. The fire crackles; the last adults

murmur. And one day, years from now, you will bring a girl here and make love to her in the bed below you, and afterwards you will walk along the dirt road, holding her hand, and tell her about your sister who recently killed herself. And one day the union brick-layer will drink more and more, and as an adult you'll see him drunk at the horse races, by himself, handing over a wad of cash to a cashier, tired and worn. And one day your parents will divorce, and your father will escape here to live an imagined Thoreauvian path, to see if he can discover a more marrowish way forward, but will return having found only loneliness. He will sell this cabin, and eventually he, too, will kill himself. But that time is distant from here, so distant that it is like the creek water tonight, a harrowing murmured rush that you know exists, but is plunged so deeply in the blackness off the banks that it is as far away as the whole wide world. It is so far from here, tonight, it might as well never exist. It is nowhere. Because here you are surrounded by all the people you love and that love you, and who won't ever, can't ever, abandon you to face the world alone.