

The River
By Lacey OLeary

"Rivers are the roads of the woods," Griffin told me this while we were floating down the Big Hole river one afternoon. He told me a lot of things.

It was the perfect day. The sky held just enough clouds to keep the sun from beating down on our darkened necks. The water was high and moving, reflecting large trees that lined cream colored shores. The lack of human life out on the river that day sparked enthusiasm for two ambitious fisherman, though masked for sake of masculinity. To be frank, Griffin was the river veteran. I was looking for a change of scenery outside the hustle and bustle of our city. Or rather, a chance to revive my weakened manhood.

He showed me just how to cast and which bate to use. The both of us casting and reeling again and again while the water carried us down stream. It was a relaxing day. I was first to feel my pole lug forward. I pulled up a beautiful fish, a rainbow of metallic colors a little bigger than a can. But Griffin loosened the hook from my catch and eased the animal back down into the water with one hand, letting it dart to freedom. That's when he told me the story.

"I don't take fish here, not until we pass the bridge," he said handing me a cold beer. "The river ain't good here," he paused, cracked open his can and took a large gulp. "No, its darn evil. From right about..." He waited, then pointed to a lone rock, a boulder size, resting close enough so that the water can caress it's base and dampen the grainy sand. It was marked carelessly with a thick dash of red paint. "Here. To the wooden bridge. That's the start and stop of Heavensworth."

"A town?" I asked, clipping my hook inside and setting down my pole. More clouds began to cover the sky and a chill settled itself down on us. The beer felt almost too cold now.

"My hometown. This river here runs through its back woods. Town is a few miles in there." He pointed to his right, westward. There were too many trees to see past a few feet.

Just then I realized what little I knew about Griffin. "Why'd you leave? If you don't mind my asking."

"I left in '86. All because of a man named Dave Melvin. A good man for the most part. Handsome and charmin' in that way where every girl swooned over him and all men wanted to be his pal. Me, I gained his friendship by bein' his neighbor. I had just bought my first

place while he had been there a few years. But both us had been native to the town. Our parents too, and our grandparents. It was that kind of place. A town where newcomers thought Heavensworth to be cute and quaint but never stayed more than a few months. There just was somethin' off about it. That somethin' has to do with this river."

I looked down at the water, its body moving in different parts. I noticed the river up close wasn't the shining blue it looked like from far off but a deep cloudy grey.

Griffin continued: "Shawna Odel became his wife. Just married and just moved in with him. They was always doin some'm or another. I'd see him out on the weekends paintin' shutters or cuttin' some plants. She'd bring him lemonade on one of those trays like in a magazine. Then I'd see her through the window washin' dishes or doin anythin' that kept her busy. Those two weren't nothin but what they seemed out in town or in their house. I never did see Griffin without a nice pair of jeans or some slacks. His hair was always combed down and a bit to the side. She was dressed sweetly whenever she'd be out. He shook everyone's hand and she'd always be smilin'. But I tell ya when her husband wasn't home I'd catch a glimpse of her over my fence in a big baggy T-shirt with no shoes on out in the grass with a boom box cranked up, dancin' away. Some times she'd just be layin' face up starin' at nothin."

"huh" I added inquisitively.

"Yahuh, a bit strange. But we all got our things," the water had slowed a bit now and Griffin oared us slightly left to dodge a large rock. "But the strangest thing I saw wasn't at that house but out on the water. See I was about to put in down at the bridge when I saw Shawna a ways up. It was Sunday and she was usually home alone. Dave went into town for the community meetin's. He was on the board. Not her thing I figured. But on this day she was in a bikini, dancin' away to whatever was playin' on her boom box. Gosh I used to remember the song, can hear it now but damn I can't remember. I watched her for a bit. She was a beautiful woman, blonde with golden skin. Not tan but a shimmerin' egg-like color that brought out those dark green eyes."

"Then she walked into the water to about her thighs, before the river could pick you up. She was in there with her fingertips grazin' the water in slow circles. She stared out into the woods across the river. For five minutes she did that. I didn't know if I should tell Dave."

I shot him a confused look and grabbed two fresh beer from the large cooler.

He chuckled puffs of air through his nostrils. I tossed him a can. I waited silently for Griffin to continue. He wasn't at all a talker, especially not at work. So, I figured staying quiet would keep him going.

"Stories go as far back as stories can go. Olden days and such. The worst horror of horrible things. People dyin' and disappearin' or worse. All happenin' in this town. And no one could understand why. There was the really old story of the explorer. My grandpa was a young boy when this naturist came lookin to take samples of the river for pollution. They thought he had moved onto another area without sayin' goodbye to his boarder. Then they found him. Half a mile into the woods from the river, sittin' up and hunched over against a tree, his chin hangin' down in his lap. It was a father and son who'd found em. My grandpa said he knew the poor boy who watched his dad lift the explorers head by his hair, lettin all the guts spill out. The boy said his ribs were cracked and all out of place, with nothin much left inside him 'cept the color black. It was like he was chewed from the inside out. What out there could have done that and left everythin' else like it was spoiled? Some kind of devil.

I shook my head...

"Some more people disappeared through the years. A teacher I think. Some kids. Some adults. Probably a handful in the olden years and another handful during mine. They either showed up dead in some way, like one man who hung himself in the woods. I believe hearin' the teacher had nothin' wrong with her, just found dead out there. Some didn't even disappear but just dropped in their homes or in the market like they was shot down. Then there was Sara. She was in my class, second grade was when it all happened. Sweetest girl you'd ever meet. She woke up one day and decided to chop all her hairs off. And her baby sisters too. She'd scream, she wouldn't eat and would kick anybody who came too close to her. And she wouldn't speak neither. Still doesn't so I hear. They came to a conclusion real fast for her because the stories had already been circlin' for decades. The river cursed her. Maybe even snatched her soul."

I suddenly became squeamish and wanted off the raft. I imagined a shark was Griffin laughed at me.

"First it was thought to be the water gettin in your mouth either from drinkin' it or some other way. That was early talk. Then people really believed it was takin the fish. That's still a theory. But it wasn't until Sara when there was talk of a monster. Her older brother said before she switched into that demon thing that they was playin in the shallow river one mornin' when she screamed and jumped. Said somethin' slimy and dark grazed her leg the

size of her little arms spread wide. Then people started thinkin' of their friends and relatives who were cursed or killed and they said they had been in the river pretty deep too. The thing was pickin' his victims just by its touch. John Willis swears on his life he watched his cousin catch the bastard with his fishin' pole and got his head up with his bare hands just enough to see its black scales and horns down its neck. Eyes like fire. Said it wasn't anything God made for Eden. His cousin got shot huntin' the next week. Right in the gut with a rifle. I think they said it was an M22.

"Who did it?" I quickly asked.

"Nobody knows. Brother said he was huntin' alone. Maybe a moose"

I laughed but Griffin didn't this time.

I glanced down at the murky water. I didn't feel like fishing anymore.

"But see it was only in town lines. The seein's. And the feelin's. And those who died or disappeared or hell, had their houses burned down. The cursed had one thing in common. They played in this river inside town lines. All my growin' up every one of us knew. You can fish the river, boat or land, just don't take nothin' from the painted rock to the wooden bridge. If your pole bends over like an acrobat cut your string. And whatever's you do, don't you dare swim."

I estimated that we were probably near three miles down river now. But I kept waiting for that bridge. The water began to pick up speed and we neared a cluster of rocks. Griffin steered us around them just as the river reached an arm up and slapped it down on our raft. I was partially wet, torso and arm. It was still cloudy and now I was shivering a bit. The rapids had ceased and we eased into a steady and slow drift.

"So this woman. She disappeared?" I asked.

Griffin shook his head, "No, no". He paused for a second, oared a little right then looked back at me. I could see it in his wrinkled face that his mind was taking him back in time. Like when you find an old photograph unexpectedly, lodged behind your bed frame or in a safe.

He picked up his beer. "Bless the cursed. But heaven help the souls who loved them."

Then he told me what happened. He told it quick, as long as it takes for a loose man to drink his third beer.

"It was like Sara," he began. "One day Shawna didn't feel like gettin dressed no more. Hardly ate. Wanted to lay in bed from sunrise to sunset. Depression they said. But Dave came over a week or so after it started. And he said to me 'Griffin, her eyes are black as pit stone. She

ain't my wife. On the outside she is but on the inside she ain't my wife.' Then he put his head in his hands and started weepin'. So I told him what I saw that Sunday afternoon. Her standin' in the river. And in that very moment he stopped the cryin', stood up and neatly tucked in my table chair. Then he headed home.

"He didn't come back. And I didn't hear or see nothin over there all night. So I rang in the mornin'. And when he didn't answer I walked on over and knocked. Shit he answered right away. Kind of in a panic too. Then his shoulders sank and he waved me in and shut the door. Apparently he'd been waitin' all mornin' for Father Friar. The first thing I says to him was 'you'z gonna do what!' But he was convinced. He reasoned no one ever did try it on little Sara. Hell, we'd know if there was an exorcism in Heavensworth.

"When Father Friar did show up Dave asked me to stay. While the two were talkin' low in the kitchen I had gone into the livin' room, shocked to see Shawna had come down stairs to sit in front of the fireplace. It was summer, the thing wasn't lit but she just kept starin' at it like it was. She was in that same baggy T-shirt, no makeup, hair a mess. Still beautiful though I tell ya."

Griffin took his eyes off the river and looked at me, "You ever know a girl like that?"

"Yeah," I said. "Once."

He looked amused and nodded as if to agree to something that wasn't said out loud.

"Anways. I figured she knew what was goin on and I wasn't about to make small talk with her. I sat down on the sofa across from the chair she was in. Shawna didn't move her head so I figured she didn't even know I was in the room. Then, my god, she turned her head slower than this rivers movin' and looked me right in the eyes. She was smilin'. I saw what Griffin saw too."

"Then Father Friar and Dave came in. Father tried to keep the whole thing calm but as soon as he began flickin' water at her she tried to bolt. Dave caught her and wrestled her to the ground, pinning her shoulders. He asked me to hold her knees. Father Friar held up his black bible and mumbled scriptures to her. He had a lot to say. She was fightin' and screamin'. Then Dave started in screamin' back, 'give me back my wife! Damn it you river devil, give me back my wife!'. His nose was touchin' hers. Then finally she got too tired to fight and it all came to a stop. After that things were better. I saw the two of them leavin' the house for somethin' that very weekend. She was in a pretty dress and they looked from where I was standin' to be happy. But the town caught wind of what

Father Friar had to do for a young lady who swam too deep in the river.

“No one would talk to her after that. Men gave her looks, children cowered behind their mothers. And mothers with other mothers gossiped. Especially Mrs. Molina. That old woman couldn't have been more than five foot one but she'd stick her neck so far out just to get a piece of what was going on behind doors. One day Shawna was buyin' bread at the deli and she'd been shorted. So she's tryin' to explain to the cashier, countin' the bills and coins in front of him. Mrs. Molina happened to be waitin' in line and when she saw that she pointed and yelled, 'She's tryin' to fool you! Don't you all see? That sneaky river devil!' And that really got everyone goin. Later on I realized the fuss in the deli happened the same day she...”

Griffin stopped speaking. He took in a deep breathe and an ample amount of beer. Then he cleared his throat.

“I was out late after work having a few with the boys. Didn't get in 'til way after dark. As I was openin' my door I heard yellin' and fussin' in the Melvin's backyard. They both sounded angry but he was fumin', just as he was durin' Father Friars visit. I hurried inside and opened my side window. Silence for a while. Then I heard his pickup start and pull out of the driveway. If there's one thing I know from bein' the Melvin's neighbor its that those two don't leave their house after dark on a week day. So I hopped into my truck and tried my best to catch up to him but I didn't see him. So I drove downtown and searched for his blue truck parked anywhere. Then the thought jumped in my head and made my heart thump. Only took me 10 minutes to find his truck parked alongside the river, his headlights shinin' on the bridge. They was both up there. She was on the other side of the rail. Her feet were dangling but her arms were holdin' on with no might at all. She was held by rope wrapped around her chest and criss crossed over her shoulders. Her hangin' head was movin' just a little bit but she looked to be half asleep. I was just out of my car yellin' when he let her down into the water. He wasn't listenin' to me. I hollered so loud but he was hollerin' too, probably at that river thing to come touch her again. Another try at reversin' the curse. I don't know. Maybe it never came because she was bein' pulled too far underneath the bridge makin her out of town lines. That night the tide was too high and so the river was movin' too quick. He lost sight of her but I saw what happened from the shore. The rope rubbed back and forth against the wood until it snapped. I ran down along the river and so did he. Her arms got tangled up in the slack and her head went

under. I should have gone in the minute she did. But I was raised not to, damnit. I should have.”

“I felt uneasy about the whole thing. I told the sheriff what had happened, how he dangled her off the bridge with a rope. I don’t really know if Dave would have liked me to sugar coat it but I told it just as I seen it. Every second from when I pulled up. Someone a few days later told me Dave was taken into the station for questionin’ and then was free to go home. Casseroles and baked things were left on Dave’s porch while he was plannin’ the service. I overheard someone say ‘It’s very sad. Poor Dave. She knew not to play in that water.’ Either the sheriff didn’t feel the need to tell no body of that night or the town felt they would have done the same exact thing had it been them.”

“The body was found three or so miles down a few days after the service and there was a proper burial. Not many people showed though. Her folks couldn’t bear it. I was there. Dave looked beaten down, older. But still sharp and clean. I think he remarried few years later. I don’t know, I sold the house and moved to Helena. Needed a fresh start somewhere with a lot more minds and a lot less rivers.”

The sun began to peek out of the clouds and the water blinked with silvery specs. Behind the boat it’s blue shining tail snaked above us and then disappeared into a rocky hill. We had already gone under the bridge. I didn’t even notice. Griffin casted out and I watched. It wasn’t long before his pole leaned over the side of the boat. He reeled in a small rainbow fish and unhooked it’s pouty mouth. He placed the flopping thing into a cooler marked with a black x.

“We’ll keep this one.”