

Big River, little river

I was alone in the boat, cigarette in mouth. Nose busted, nothing left to give. Everything got done piss drunk by myself, late nights when no one's around. Laundry and the shopping. Everything ends up all over the place. I am the dumbest man driving a boat on the Mississippi today. I weigh five hundred pounds. I want to talk to you. When I was a kid, I wanted to work the canals. All I wanted, work the canals and make love. Now I'm on the big river. I hate it. Everyone on the big river knows everything except me. I'm dumb. Women like me. Women like my face. Women don't like me. They like me till I talk, which I can't. Women want to talk. Men too. I want to talk to you. Coffee's on. Nose hurts. Can you read? Everyone on the big river is hot and in pain. When I was young they said I looked like Gary Cooper. Now I'm five hundred pounds. I like it better this way. Also when I was young, I could talk. Now I drive the big boat with cigarette in mouth and nose blown open, muddy water spraying into it all the time. I pour lemon juice down the holes for infection. I'm always sticky. Hope you can read. I can't stop writing all I see. There's families living in shacks on the big river that move them up and down the bank with the swell. They give me soup during winter for tours of the big boat. Once I gave some of them a ride, and they gave me big packs of cocaine and heroin. We only went a few hundred feet.

On the little river they live in houses and tell bedtime stories about the wind at night, good sights, tastes, smells. Big river stories are all hung up on animals watching and what they might do. They might come out the water or forest and kill everyone for food.

There are giant otters on the big river, come up from South America. The wildlife folks don't believe the five-hundred-pound river captain. I get it. But just spend a day on the big river with me. They won't even do that. How is that science now? Spend a week. You'll drink and smoke with me and realize I am right to be five hundred pounds like a watermelon on the big river. You might want to get fat too. I got stories I can tell you. You'll blow cig smoke up at the clouds and nod, Yes, yes you are right, fat man. That is when you'll see the Giant River Otter. After drinking and smoking all night smelling the lemon juice on my face. When they hunt mornings you can see them coming down

from the banks and dens they dug. Just like shack people. They even build latrines. I have watched all this, government man. What can you tell me? Nose is hurting bad, pounding right in the middle of my face.

The sky burns hot red all day then cools down to blue and purple. Stars start to show through the dark. I wait for them, just drinking easy. They show on the water, don't even have to look up. Certain fish feed at night, it's not so boring. Animals come down to drink and dip their paws in. You're quiet and might as well not even be there, far as they're concerned. Smoking and drinking's not so loud unless you got company. You don't need sleep as much as they say. Things are cool on the river. I see my family in the stars waiting for me back on the canal, faces made up of connect the dots. I see everything I've ever seen. It's been nice, who cares what they say? Everyone is dying back there. And me on this big river. Five hundred pounds? They either forgot about me or hate me for going big river on them. That's what it's like back there. So what? What have they done? What do they weigh?

I see cats and dogs in the stars.

When I was a young kid on the tiny river we had lots of cats. If you can't read, I guess this is all for nothing. Jesus. By tiny river I mean the creek I grew up on. That must be where it all started, all this water. We always had lots of cats, but they had to live in the garage. This was in the country. They had to live there cause my brother was allergic. Since they were outdoor cats they were always getting eaten up by fox and coyote. You learn how to lose something easy. If they lived long enough they would leave as males or stay and get knocked up as females. When females stayed and got knocked up they had kittens in the garage. We had lots of kittens. One kitten I loved was called Catnip. Catnip grew up and left for a while then came back. When he came back there were kittens and he hated it, almost killed them all, arching his back like a spirit. He was mad at me. He hissed. I had to drive him off. That hurt. I didn't see him for years until one day I was out on the tiny river looking for arrowheads and looked up to see him taking a drink. He flopped on his back wild and happy and forgot the whole thing about the kittens. We made up. I was catching crawfish in a bucket and fed him them one by one. Must've been at least thirty of them suckers. He left when the sun started showing.

Another time at the little river at dark I was fishing with my uncle and his dog. What I mean by that is the dog wasn't just watching. All three of us fished. He had the dog trained so it would dive in after them if they got their way off the hook. Sometimes the dog would come up with one. I saw it for myself. He was a Brittany. Name was Brittany too. I told my uncle it was the stupidest thing I ever heard, that you got to name that dog something else. This was when I could still talk. All he said was that it was already named when he got it, there was nothing he could do. To change over a dog's name after they're

used to it is cruel, he said. He said he wanted a male dog named Brittany just as much as the next guy, which was not at all, but that it was a good dog and too late now. Well, we were fishing and that dog dove down in after one and didn't come back up. It was a fast river after a storm and we shouldn't have fished. My crazy uncle dove in after cause he loved that dog and I never saw him or Brittany again. People got a lot of love in them. We were drinking a whole lot. All three of us. Metal dog bowl all filled up with Old Mil. That night I told him, "You're crazy, Unc. You got a male Brittany named Brittany that's got a drinking problem and fishes better than you. You're crazy." Everyone's all up in the stars. They got a big boat to look down on.

When those otters come down to hunt they are six feet long and hungry. Some on the river say they were men and women once, but the big river swallowed them up whole and changed them over. I can see it. The big river and me wait for them and nod as they dip their slick coats in to hunt smoky mornings. They nod back and go down in, swimming in formation like football players. I heard they found their fossils from fourteen million years ago. I figure they got a game plan by now. Six feet is taller than me. Not bigger though.

One of them is fat, must be their queen. She never hunts, just waits for fish brought to her like Queen Bee. One day she came aboard. She was prepared, planned it. She was dried off and wearing men's trousers, ratty gardening hat with holes in it, broken gold watch on her wrist. She asked, "Will we board?" I nodded, and she came on deck, stood on two feet to shake my hand. She was seven feet tall, near four hundred pounds, leaving muddy web feet marks all on my teak. She looked down embarrassed and said, "Oh. I forget that shoe now." She talks better than me. I pointed at my bare feet and smiled, and she started laughing, wheezing, having fits. She was laughing so hard she had to go back on all fours. Then she stood up and gave me a fish wrapped in skunk cabbage, a sun-bleached Arkansas Razorbacks ball cap, and a shiny silver necklace with a red-and-white bobber as pendant. "Made it," she said. I nodded and put the hat and necklace on. I started frying the fish on a skillet with wild onions, kudzu, raspberries, and some bacon I was saving. Soon as the bacon hit the skillet she went down on all fours and rushed over, quicker than she looks, almost bowled me over to smell it. She closed her eyes and whiffed her nose up and became animal again, put her muzzle down in the popping grease and ate some up before it was cooked, burned her snout bad but was too busy with the bacon. She went over to my hammock, flopped in, and chewed with her eyes closed. She breathed heavy through her nose after she swallowed, looked over and said, "What that hell is it? Can it be?" I looked at her and put one finger up to say, You just wait, and kept cooking. She was embarrassed again and got out of the hammock, stood and pulled up her trousers. I smiled and she sat at my small table. I brought over some pictures of where I came from on the canal. She looked and kept saying, "Wow...wow, wow, wow, wow, wow."

I finished cooking and brought over the plates, put my hand on her shoulder as I set hers down. She jumped but then saw the food and relaxed, sucked it down in a few bites before I even sat. I put the rest of my bacon on her plate. She picked it up and threw it to the pack who were done hunting and lounging on their backs at the stern. We heard the water thrashing, then I started to eat. I could feel her looking at me when she said, "Love you. I love you!" I wanted to say it back, but I cannot talk. I smiled and poured her a brandy. She slurped it down and said, "Me and you. Whole little river together, why not?" I was still thinking and pretended not to hear. That made her mad. She slapped her hand down, shaking the table, knocking the pictures and my food off. "Why not me with that little river and you! Love you now! A castle we can build. Fill that whole castle up with fish!"

What do you do? I wanted to explain to her how when she got to the little river she would feel how I feel on the big river. I picked up a book and tore one of the blank pages out the back. I got the carpenter pencil and started writing on it: BIG RIVER HOME OTTER, LITTLE RIVER HOME ME. She got confused and mad, for sure she didn't know about writing. She smelled it, pushed the paper away, and said, "Nah."

I thought about a castle filled with fish. It seemed all right to me. King Bee. Pack would do all the hunting. We could smoke and drink forever, little river to ourselves. Stars everywhere, bacon, coffee, wind blowing nice, cattails swaying. Then I thought about what the shack people told me about men and women turning into Giant River Otters.

She looked mad like maybe about to attack me. I heard of all sorts of things otters do, that they can be mean. Everyone likes to talk about them screwing corpses. I don't like that talk. I won't say I wasn't scared though. I sat down, calm-looking, poured two more brandies. She copied me and faked calm. She was good at it. It scared me. I looked at her snout, the bacon burn mark. I smiled big, touched my own busted nose then sort of pointed to hers, comparing the two. She burst out laughing again, making wild mink movements, fell out of the chair. Going crazy. She drank her brandy then waddled over to the hammock and fell back in, saying, "And about that river smoking? How it smokes and you can too." I nodded, rolled a couple cigs, put both in my mouth and lit them, walked over and put hers in her mouth. She started coughing mad, laughing and smiling. She got the hang of it, started smoking easy and swinging in the hammock, then said, "Mmm. Yep. It is how you smoke. River and you can."

I sat back down, and the chair legs gave way. Five hundred pounds flat on my back, feeling dumber than ever. I looked up and she was smoking heavy, eyes closed, didn't even notice. I pulled myself up and went over to the fridge, still had some bacon left. I put it on the skillet, and she smelled it, looking back at me saying, "No way, how again?" I smiled and put the You Just Wait finger up. She didn't run and burn her snout this time, just stayed in the hammock. I cooked it perfect, cooled it and brought the whole plate

over. Every time we're on the same side of the boat it tips heavy cause we're nine hundred pounds. She said, "Yes. That can be it. That whole thing can be it. Castles are big."

We were quiet for a while, boat rocking with the sun going down, rest of the pack flopping up the riverbank to sleep. Things felt nice. I poured myself another brandy and rolled up two more smokes, went over and she took it with her hand, blew smoke in my face and asked, "How about that medium river?"

I hadn't thought of it. I realized she must've already been all over, rivers of all sizes. She's smarter than me. I can't even speak, nose turning purple and blue like the sky.

Right this second I'm teaching her how to drive the big boat so we can go medium river and start life, whole rest of the pack swimming alongside, smiling in the sun. Stars coming out later, everyone can see. I got fish until I die and big love on board. Wish me luck.