

THE ISLAND IN THE RIVER

Chad Holley

They had been strong, as those are strong who know neither doubts nor hopes.

—Joseph Conrad

We slept in the car that night somewhere in Louisiana, and it got bad cold on us. My buddy Louis kept squirming and cussing up in the front seat, and in the back I curled tight and hunted heat down in my coat. I dozed enough to dream I was freezing all the way to death, and it wasn't like they say it is. It was the hardest way I've ever gone in my dreams.

We were back on the interstate hours before daylight. Louis's heater wouldn't come on, and in the glow of the dashlights we rode hunched forward, gritting our teeth, and not a word between us. At one point I did reach over and bang the heater knobs with the heel of my hand. When nothing happened, I slid my hand back under my thigh and hunkered down again.

"I keep hoping that heater'll decide to come on," I said. Talking made the roadnoise seem louder inside the car.

"Well, you know what they say, Raymond," Louis said. "Hope in one hand and shit in the other, you'll see which hand gets warm."

I didn't answer him.

We finally went over the river into Vicksburg, and with it now getting morning enough that we could see our breath inside the car, we started up into the Delta. We had been gone almost six months. All we planned to do was drive up through the Delta and go through Silas, just to see if things would look different to us now, I guess, and keep going. I was the one said we ought to do it. I don't know. Neither of us could really think straight anymore.

A small, weak sun came up, and I rode looking out my window. There was the Delta, a vast sheet of mud under the white sky, still as a picture all the way to the horizon. Black trees standing out there in the mud and sometimes a solitary metal farm building far out in the distance made the Delta seem even bigger and emptier. I don't know why I expected any different. I have never seen that emptiness

blink. I let my forehead fall against the cold glass.

"I've seen enough," I said. "This can all just go to hell."

Louis didn't answer. We were about an hour out of Vicksburg and another one yet from Silas.

"You can drop me off or I don't care what we do," I said, "but I ain't going through Silas."

I looked over at Louis. He was squinting his eyes like he was thinking. He was cold and haggard as I was, and he looked especially skinny with his leather streetcoat buttoned up and his Dodgers cap pulled down hard on his head. Finally he gave me that ever-game little shrug of his and that nonchalant tone.

"You want to see if they still got that branch bank up here in Shardale?"

We didn't have all that much cash on us, but we weren't broke enough to need to stop in Shardale either.

I turned my face to the window again. Alongside us, row ends bent past at the speed of thought.

"I don't care what we do," I said.

Outside of Shardale we stopped at an old store to top off our gas. There was frost on the pumps. In the trunk of the car I dug through my bag until I found the .45 automatic I had picked up in L.A. It hurt to hold that chunk of ice.

Along the highway as we came into Shardale there was a John Deere place that had apparently gone out of business and next to it a little run-down feed store. Louis watched them go by. "Damn," he said, and he kind of winced and smiled at the same time. "We drove two thousand miles to hit a bank in Shardale." He shook his head, apparently as amused with us as ever. It had been weeks since I myself had been all that amused. But it used to be we both laughed at us all the time. And I think we both knew that's all we were ever really about. It wasn't like we had some solemn friendship or something. We were just running-buddies from high school who hadn't yet figured out what to do next and both thought that was real funny. When we left Silas I know I laughed my head off. I couldn't believe us. It was on a weekday afternoon near the end of August, and Louis and I were standing around in the gravel lot of Mitch's store out near the elevator. One of those days I just didn't have what it took for working all day at a grain elevator in Silas, Mississippi. So I had left the elevator at lunch, told them I had the stomachache.

Louis was supposed to be helping some guy out that way with his catfish ponds, even though Louis had just gotten out of county lockup under suspicion of stealing some of that same guy's equipment, which come to find out he had in fact done. So that afternoon we were talking about that and drinking beer out of a cooler I kept on my backseat. Eventually, we stood against my car without talking, and after a while we started humming rocks at Mitch's sign out by the road. Not thinking much about it, I sung out this one line my daddy used to sing over and over from some song I never heard.

"We got to get outta this place . . ."

Louis stopped throwing rocks.

"We should," he said. "No plan, no good-byes, just scot-free ass-haulin'." He dusted his hands and started grinning. "That'd be hilarious."

"Where should we go?" I said.

I threw another rock.

"You name it, baby," Louis said, and when I didn't answer him right away he said, "Seriously."

I was serious. I had another rock in my hand, and I turned to the knee-deep field of soybeans that began at the edge of Mitch's parking lot and threw the rock far as I could through the dead space out over the field. The rock pattered on the leaves not far away.

"L.A.," I said.

Louis's lean, sunburnt face had broken into a big smile. He nodded toward his car and started across the gravel. Louis was not one to be outdone for spontaneous.

"We can take the Buick," he said, and for a second I thought he was wanting to leave right then. I got nervous. The loud whine of the locusts went suddenly electric in my head.

But when Louis got his door open and one leg inside he looked back at me and said, "Dark-thirty, baby. Have your shit packed."

That's all he said, and he was smiling the whole time. But that evening he pulled up in the road out front of my aunt's house. And my shit was packed. We laughed and laughed.

When we hit a liquor store in New Mexico I didn't even have a gun. Like Louis said once, all you need is one gun and it doesn't even have to work. We probably hit six or eight places in those months out west, and I found out, it ain't that big a deal really. Cashiers and tellers are trained to come off the money with no fuss. Anybody can take it. Long as you don't monkey with the ones

behind glass. And then the other tricky thing is when some of these places have a cop inside. That had happened to us once, at this quickie store out in California. But, you know, when you get to the door and see there's a damn cop standing in there, there's no law says you got to go on in and make a mess. So that night when I got up to the glass doors and saw this woman cop inside, I said, "Oh shit," and tried to turn around. But Louis was behind me and he plowed us both on in. The woman cop was sipping coffee at the end of the counter. Louis walked right at her. He had an expression I'd never seen on his face before, all flushed and serious. In one smooth move he whipped his snubnose .38 out of his streetcoat and put that joker right in her face, and he backed the hammer. Then he just stood there with his arm leveled at her eyes. It was not a pleasant thing to be around, with the hammer on that .38 ready to drop and having no idea what was going on in Louis's head, but I went on and did the talking and everything went fine. Later we laughed at his new theory: If you let them study you from a distance they could identify you again no problem, but if you stuck your face right up in theirs they wouldn't remember shit. Which is funny, but like I said, by the time we were riding back into Shardale, laughing at this kind of thing had long since gotten old for me.

When we got into Shardale that morning, we pulled into the bank's customer parking lot, and there were no other cars there. We parked up near the glass doors and sat with the car idling. We were in no hurry and weren't worried about folks seeing us, because best we knew nobody out west had started looking for us by name. Louis checked the cylinder on his .38 one last time and snapped it shut. I'd checked my piece several times coming into town and I wasn't checking it again.

"Well," Louis said, and he sighed like he was tired, "game time."

We left the car idling and stepped up onto the sidewalk. My spine was starting to jump from the cold and from being geared up. I had my empty duffel bag in my hand. We entered the bank, Louis in front.

The bank was small, just one large room, and inside it was warm and soft and quiet, with carpet and lots of plants. In the middle of the room there was an expensive-looking sofa and a nice coffee table. It was just a bank, but I couldn't get over how cozy and civilized it felt, and paused there inside the glass doors beside Louis, I was suddenly embarrassed to be doing this.

There were no customers in the room and no teller at the counter,

but across the lobby there was a cop. He was a big old boy, standing with his butt against the wall and his hands in his pockets.

Louis started across the lobby toward him.

I looked at the cop just enough to see that he was watching us. I let Louis get a little closer to him and I went up to the counter.

The only girl working was standing back near the drive-through window and had not noticed me yet. She was talking softly on the telephone. Beyond her, out the teller window, there were the two drive-through lanes and then a bare, black pecan tree at the edge of an empty field. The tint in the window made the sky over the field look darker, like it might rain. I took a deep breath of the dry, warm lobby air.

That's when I heard a cheerful voice say, "Louis Day," and I turned to see the cop smiling at Louis.

My first thought was that the guy might have played baseball for Shardale—we used to play them all the time. But then his red hair and his big ears registered, and I knew who it was. The cop was damn Yancy Purvis, this guy from Silas that went to school with me and Louis.

Louis's face had turned dark red. He did not answer Yancy. He just walked up in front of him.

Yancy had stopped smiling. "Louis," he said.

Louis raised his pistol into Yancy's face. He thumbed the hammer back.

"My God," said the girl. She had come to the counter. We looked each other in the face, and I unzipped my coat to show the grip of my pistol. I laid the duffel bag up on the counter.

As I watched the girl stack money over into the bag, it was hard for me to concentrate. Louis's leather coat kept creaking, but the one time I looked back, neither Louis nor Yancy had moved. Yancy's butt was still against the wall, his hands still in his pockets.

Yancy had graduated a year ahead of us, and sometime afterward we all started seeing him around Silas in his police outfit. Everybody used to joke about it. But I never did think it was that funny. I mean, nobody could deny that Yancy Purvis was a retard, and here they were letting him walk around Silas, and then Shardale too I guess, with a loaded gun and the right to arrest people. They must let anybody do it. Though I'll confess, I couldn't do it. Because when you think about it, if a guy's going to step up and claim a spot as the law, he better know down deep that the good of society and what-have-you is an absolutely worthwhile thing. Or at

least better be pretty damn hopeful about it.

When we walked out of the bank, the cold met us immediately. We had Yancy with us. Louis had handcuffed him. Nobody talked, but Louis handled Yancy and that pistol like a man who's decided something way inside his head, a man I wasn't crazy about getting in that car with.

Louis drove us out of Shardale. We stayed close to the speed limit, sat for a red light. It was very quiet in the car. It reminded me of riding in the car when my daddy was around and all of us would stare off in a different direction, scared to say anything.

We left Shardale's few houses and stores and churches, and the Delta opened up again, big and winter-wet and empty. It was getting to where I couldn't watch out the window anymore. I was wishing to God that we had driven east into the hill country. But we were heading west, farther out into the Delta, to find this cousin of Louis's who lived inside the Mississippi levee. Louis said the guy was a certified nut and wouldn't care if we laid over with him a couple of days. That had sounded fine to me, mostly because I wanted to go over inside the Mississippi levee. I had never been, though I had lived my whole life not two hours from it and always heard about it from folks who hunted over there. I was curious to finally see it for myself. But I didn't know whether we'd even get there now.

I zipped my coat up and turned my back to my door.

Louis was stone-faced. His left hand was up on the wheel, and his right hand still held his pistol flat on the seat beside him.

Somebody finally said something. It was Yancy.

"Ray," he said. His voice was small, but calm. "Why are y'all pulling this crap?"

I set my eyes on the highway out front of us. I didn't answer him.

"Ray."

I never looked back there at him.

Yancy then said, "Louis?"

I watched what happened out the corner of my eye. Louis jerked the pistol up off the seat. He started glancing over in the back, and Yancy said, "Come on, man . . . now . . . wait," and Louis kept his hold on the steering wheel and got the pistol over in the backseat and Yancy was yelling, "Don't, come on . . ." when Louis looked back there again. I stared hard as I could at the windshield.

It sounded like the world fell on the car. Then a ringing silence.

It took me a second to hear Yancy laboring down in the seat.

Louis still had his arm hung over the seatback, and he started looking back there again. I put my fingers in my ears.

There were two more severe thumps.

When I took my fingers out of my ears, there was a faraway hum in the car, but no noise in the backseat. The car stunk with pistol smoke.

Louis brought his arm back over the seat and rested the gun beside him. But I saw how he kept holding it, kept his finger curled on the trigger, and it made me glance around for my gun. It was down in the floor, on my duffel bag at my feet. But Louis finally left his pistol where it was and rolled down his window.

I had gotten almost no sleep the night before and then been keyed up all morning, and now I started feeling hollow and sleepy. For a while I tried to think through what we could do with Yancy Purvis's body but I couldn't stay with it for remembering different things about him from school and from seeing him out nights in his uniform in Silas, and then I couldn't think about anything but how cold I was getting again. I let my head fall back against the headrest and just sat there watching the road with Louis.

There was no mistaking the levee when it appeared. Out there in front of us was a high mound sown with the brightest green winter grass. It ran out of sight in both directions. I sat up to look at it, at how long it was and green it was, and I couldn't take my eyes off of it.

The road we were on turned in front of the levee and ran alongside the foot of it for a little ways, but in the turn there was a gravel ramp that ran up on top of the levee. Louis slowed down and took the ramp, and we turned south on the gravel road that ran along the top. The dull, gray Delta shadowed us on our left. But out my window on our right was that land inside the Mississippi levee that I had never seen before. For some reason I had come to hope like hell that it was as different as they said it was, and I tell you, it didn't let me down.

Rising up here and there out of the tall yellow grass inside the levee were trailers up on stilts, regular trailers, but held fifteen or twenty feet up in the air on bowed iron girders. Beyond them the hardwood ran so thick you couldn't see the sky through their tops,

all those black branches wild and matted like a huge nest of water moccasins. When there were breaks in the trees you could see oxbow water, wide and choppy, and birds that looked like seagulls floated and fell and gusted low over the water, and above them small dark birds rode the wind in circles like bits of ash in the thermals of a fire, and the wind came up on the levee and whipped against Louis's car. Out in one lake we passed I saw a heavily wooded island.

When I looked over at Louis he didn't seem to have even glanced over inside the levee, and it occurred to me that he had probably seen this before. Though I wondered if he had ever been much impressed by it, even the first time he saw it, and I thought probably not.

We rode south on the levee for a good while, but I can't say how long because I lay my head back again finally and closed my eyes and gave my mind over to the lake wind that whistled and brushed against the car. I did not sleep, but I found myself walking a river island, with blue mud and wet roots and flood-twisted trees and loud birds and old, heavy-headed deer, and from deep under the firm earth where I stood I felt the giant slide of more dark water than I could imagine. I tried to go to that island in sleep, but could not slip away from the freeze inside the car, from thoughts of Yancy, from what remained on my left.

The next thing I remember was hearing Louis say, "Shit. Shit." When I opened my eyes, he was watching the rearview mirror. We had sped up considerably. I looked back to see blue lights flashing up on the levee.

Louis banged the steering wheel with his fist. His eyes began searching out in front of us.

I sat up and turned in my seat to watch back, steadying myself with a hand up on the dash. I saw Yancy's dark sleeve, but I didn't look down in the seat. The car behind us looked like a deputy sheriff's. I couldn't tell whether it was gaining on us.

All I could think to say was, "We got to get off of here."

Louis did not say anything.

There was nowhere to get off the levee. On our left lay a mud field. On our right the hardwood had come up near the levee and was flooded with still, khaki water. There were no roads or ramps or trailers in sight. We went on like this for several minutes. Louis kept surging the gas and whenever he did the car skittered side to side beneath us.

When the roadblock appeared way down the levee, my first thought was that a bunch of deer were standing in the road. But we got closer and the blue lights came on and my head went really hot and started tingling and Louis was muttering something. I picked my pistol up off the duffel bag and it felt light as air in my hand. I could barely tell I was holding it. Something about this made my gut sick. We did not slow down and we got close enough to see it was two brown patrol cars parked across the levee and behind them a red pickup with a flashing light up on the dash, and we left the levee, down the Delta side. It might have made no difference, but I would've tried the other side.

I felt the body of the car leave the ground completely for a heartbeat before we hit the foot of the levee and started across a soggy bean field. We didn't go twenty-five yards before Louis's car sank to the chassis.

When the Buick quit on him, Louis snatched up his pistol from where it had fallen into the floorboard and he opened his door and slogged out into the bean field, trying to get up enough momentum to run.

I still held my pistol in my hand. I opened my door and stood up into the field. The air was raw and wet and I could smell the mud I was standing in. That field ran all the way back to a dim treeline on the horizon. I looked into that long, empty distance, and then I looked at Louis, huffing and grunting but not really going anywhere, not even started on crossing all that field. I sat down in the mud beside the car.

The police cars were peeling down off the levee. They stopped at the edge of the field, their lights still flashing. I watched the officers jump out, all zipped up in their brown coats, and one of them hollered to us. I reared back and threw my gun into the air toward them. It didn't go very far.

They wanted me to get up and walk toward them with my hands on my head, but I sat where I was. I did get scared they might shoot me, so I lay back flat on the mud.

I quit listening to them and just lay looking up at the low, white sky. There was nothing in it. The sky did not look like something that was deep. I thought something inside me was going to die, and I laid my arm across my eyes. Out on that river island, I went down on a bed of crackling summer vine.

When they got to me they were still yelling at Louis, who was somewhere out there on the other side of the car. They got me over on my stomach and I saw the old white-haired man in the bunch, who I'm guessing was the sheriff, look over in Louis's backseat. "Oh man," he said and ran the back of his hand across his mouth. He opened the door and kneeled in.

Two of the deputies stripped my coat off me and got me handcuffed and started hustling me through the mud toward the patrol cars at the levee. I was shivering. Behind us they were still yelling at Louis.

The deputies shut me in a patrol car, where it was dry and warm. The radio was hissing softly. Out the window I could see Louis, a little ways out in the field beyond his car. He wasn't trying to run anymore. He was standing, facing the men who watched him from behind his car. They all had their guns drawn. One of them had a rifle laid across Louis's hood and was looking at Louis through the scope. While I was watching, Louis made like he was going to raise his pistol and when he did, puffs of smoke went up from the car and there was a cluster of pops. Louis sat down in the field, then jammed his shoulder into the mud. His neck was twisted so that his face turned up to the sky. But I think he just fell that way.

The radio squawked clean and crisp, and I laid my cheek against the window glass. A deputy was approaching the patrol car. More than anything right then, I wanted to thank him for keeping that car warm.