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THE FAIRMESS DOCTRINE

BY WILLIAM D. GILL

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At Maynor Creek, Vaughn was drunk, which was not unusual, and I had to help him set up his tent. The next morning I watched him catch 56 pounds of bass in less than two hours, while from the same boat, using the same equipment and the same worms, I caught nothing from the same lake.

To look at Vaughn and to know Vaughn was to be amazed. Small in stature and blind as a mole without his corrective lenses, he was one of the most popular guys at Savannah Academy. He was mysteriously esteemed by all, transcending the rigid barriers of myriad cliques as if specially coated with some magic enzyme. He was, like the apostle Paul, all things to all people. He had the Midas touch that all teens desire, not to be able to transform objects into gold, but to be able to channel people's favor in his direction and to deflect their approbation.

Money was one thing most kids at Savannah did not lack and took for granted. Affirmation was the true currency of youth, and among the pampered children of Mississippi's elite, it was craved with the appetite of wolves. Savannah students were nothing if not two things: white as a magnolia blossom and caste happy as Brahmins. Girls checked their place on the social ladder as often as they checked their make-up, while the boys were less likely to discuss the matter, but no less likely to be aware of it.

All of which why to really know Vaughn was, was to be amazed. His family was not particularly wealthy or influential. He had no older brother or sister upon whose legacy he rested. Slightly built, but wiry as a cat, he cast no impressive physical shadow, yet he was an all around better-than-average athlete. More to the point, he was a lucky athlete. Vaughn was the one to catch the long touchdown pass, his all-state defender having slipped on the muddy turf as if tripped by the hand of providence, allowing Vaughn to scamper thirty yards to the goal line in front of a home crowd during the most important game of the season, two years in a row. Vaughn was the one whose twenty foot off-balance jump shot found the bottom of the net, despite his opponent's four inch height advantage and perfect defensive position. The coach was pale with rage at the stupidity of the shot; the big man had been underneath ready for the dish off, but the ball went in, the game was won, and the home crowd went nuts - again. Vaughn was the sprinter who smoked half a pack a day and skipped practice at will, only to anchor the AAA record setting Savannah

Rebels 4 X 440 relay team to yet another blue ribbon at the State Championships during his sophomore year. Because Savannah had the best track facilities in the state, the State Championships were naturally held at Savannah on an annual basis, so once more the home crowd devoured him.

He celebrated by attending a prayer meeting at First Presbyterian Church that evening. All the young virgins, real or otherwise, melted over him. He could have married them all that night, with their parents' and the church's approval in some big blasphemous mass ceremony, and scarcely anyone would have cared about the exception. Instead, after the closing prayer, he snuck off with some of the less savory elements in our class and smoked pot until three in the morning. It was only a secret because everyone chose to ignore it.

The next night he went on a date with Elizabeth Langley, the dominant beauty-in-residence at Savannah, and at the end of said date, they kissed for five minutes under her porch light. It was as close as anyone had ever come in her sixteen years to deflowering Elizabeth. She was a prude even by Savannah standards, which is saying more (or less, depending on your point of view) than is evident on the surface of the comment. Her frigidity was renowned. But Vaughn was a legend, all five foot nine of him.

The following Monday he was rubbing buggers on other peoples' textbooks one second and smoothing with the creme-de-la-creme of the female set the next. The perfumed breasts of Savannah's fairer belles all heaved in unison to Vaughn's glancing wink. His mystique was impenetrable and untarnished. No matter how grievous or public his violation of Savannah's genteel social standards, he remained a paragon in the eyes of those who otherwise were singularly meticulous in their scrutiny of another's behavior. Even the reigning queen guardian of North Jackson moral stricture, the toe headed pixie Mary Ellen Blakely, our very own homegrown, modern, estrogenic version of Bernard Gui, whose active tongue and hyper-malignant imagination combined to taint many a student's reputation, was saucer-eyed blind under Vaughn's transcendent spell. So much was she taken in by his high cheek bones and wit, that she had asked him to the ASW Ball, though he was a sophomore and she a junior. Such was the power of Vaughn - the power to walk through walls.

When Warren Sullivan had mentioned the idea of hitting Maynor Creek Water Park for the weekend, I had jumped aboard without a thought of protest. Never mind my lack of experience. Only the next day did I confess my embarrassing predicament to Warren. Fishing was not my strong suit. In fact, in all my sixteen years this was to be my first fishing trip. For a Southern boy this was not only unusual, it could easily be seen as a form of malnutrition, or at least educational neglect, some serious deprivation from which future character flaws might spring.

"You've never been fishing?" He was half-smiling, looking back at me like I was setting him up for a punch line.

"Nope." I could not hold his gaze, even as nonjudgmental as it was, so I glanced down at the Sullivans' living room carpet and then bounced my eyes around the room from knothole to knothole in the stained pine paneling. The room had a dark, rich, comfortable feel, much like I imagined a sitting room in a hunting lodge. Mounted bass, frozen in mid thrash and looking as if they were still fighting the good fight against steel and Teflon, hung along side the heads of two amply antlered white-tailed bucks. From just the right angle, in fact from the chair directly opposite to the one in which I was sitting, the deer appeared to be gazing directly and quizzically through their glass eyes at the chair's occupant, ready at any moment to open their mouths and speak like some unspeakable Disney animatronics horror at the Country Bear Jamboree. I always avoided that chair if at all possible.

The furniture was rugged, the couches and chairs not content to hold you on their surface, but plush and deep, swallowing up your bottom and pulling you down into comfort. Ashtrays and coasters were at both elbows making you feel welcome to live among the wood and the fabric. No velvet, satin or Queen Anne-chippendale-riccoco-curly cue crap in sight. Only hard wood, and cloth, and knots with the excusable surrounding pine of the paneling. A long rectangular watercolor of mallards in flight extended the length of and hung above the couch where Warren was sitting, a shining silver lure in his left hand. His three tiered tackle box was open and rose high like a metal wedding cake on the coffee table.

"No big deal," he said. Warren had known me since we were in the first grade, and there was just enough well concealed tremor in his voice to make me aware that I had accomplished a rarity: I had surprised him. It did not happen often. He prided himself on being unflappable, a man unmoved by any storm, rather a stoic without the burden of the undergirding philosophical baggage.

We had grown up, literally, right up the road from each other, not more than seventeen houses and one right turn separating my home from his, but until the first grade we had never set eyes on each other. One day during recess, everyone started asking for addresses and phone numbers, and it was at that point that a young Warren Sullivan crinkled his brow and gave me his signature expression of incredulity that by the age of five, and God knows how much earlier even, he had perfected and made his own.

"1527 Maria Drive? Do you know where Pinehurst is?"

"No."

"Pinehurst runs right into Maria Drive. You know where I'm talking about? It runs between Maria and McDowell Road. You know?"

"No." I did not know. Having been kept inside practically my entire life up to this point, I was lucky enough to know the name of my own street, much less which roads intersected it. Except for the hellish experience of Vacation Bible School, it wasn't until I entered kindergarten that I was either forced or allowed (depending on how you view it) to play with other children.

The pendulum clock tick-tocked loudly above Warren's head just to the left of the flying ducks. "No big deal," he repeated. The silver lure went back into the tackle box and the lid collapsed softly, clicking shut. We'll use live bait most likely. Crickets or worms. Probably crickets, since bass generally go for crickets. All you got to know is how to slide a cricket on a hook and cast it off in the water from the side of the boat."

"I can do that."

"Well, that's all there is to it. Best bass fishing in the state, they say."

"Yep." Warren had already mentioned this several times before. He had read an article on Maynor Creek months earlier in *Southern Bass Angler* and since then had been itching to get down there and try his luck.

"Better than fifteen pounders in that lake, they say. Heck, you could probably wade out into the lake naked and catch about a ten pounder on your pecker."

"I'd rather use a hook."

"Good thinking. Bass have some pretty sharp teeth."

"Don't tell Vaughn, okay?"

Warren tapped on the table with his index fingers. "He wouldn't care. I won't tell him though."

We loaded Vaughn's Jeep full of guns, tackle, rods and reels, tents, sleeping bags, two 30 gallon ice chests, a brown bag of junk food, and the three of us. Heading down highway 49, a twelve foot bass boat in tow, we all had on fishing caps, which were essentially baseball caps with something like *Bass Pro Shop* or *kick some bass* stitched on the forehead instead of a team logo.

I had shown up at Warren's house an hour earlier, with my meager cache of supplies, wearing an Ole Miss hat. Warren yanked it off my head and plopped on a tattered *Southern Bass Angler* cap in its place.

"I'm not wearing this." It was one of those cheap mesh and foam deals with a long brow and a camouflage pattern. Warren had gotten it free by taking out a three year subscription. "Looks like it's been up somebody's butt."

"Look, Adler," said Warren. He drew his eyebrows close and softened his voice. "Vaughn'll be here in a few minutes. If he sees that plaid Ole Miss thing on your head, he'll know."

I was silent for a second or two while the implications washed over me. "Oh. You think so?"

"Uh huh." He held out the *Southern Bass Angler* hat to me like he was handing me a badge. The brim was frayed and the entire left side was stained by some unclean uniform brownness, either by coffee, tobacco spit, motor oil, all three, or something else much worse that I didn't want to know about.

Vaughn arrived on cue, a minute later. He came through the door in a t-shirt, shorts and a green Jackson Country Club golf cap. I squinted at Sullivan. Warren promptly whisked the cap from Vaughn's head and tossed him a beat up yellow model with a fishing logo.

"I'm not wearing this," said Vaughn. "Give me back my damn hat, Sullivan."

Warren looked incredulous, which for Warren was as natural as blinking. "You're not serious."

"Yeah, I'm serious." Vaughn glanced at me in confusion. "Del Gilbert!" He always called me Del Gilbert. I had never asked why. "What's that growing on your head?"

By now my ears were red. "Yeah, Sullivan. What exactly is this garbage doing on my head?"

"You shut up, Adler," Warren ordered with a steady pointing finger, but he was looking straight at Vaughn. Some heretical act had been committed by one who should have known better. "I can't believe you, Vaughn. Showing up here with some lime green cap. Got your little white braid of rope over the brim and some freaking country club name on the front. You've been hanging out in North Jackson too long. You don't wear this kind of thing down at Maynor Creek."

"We're just going fishing." Vaughn's hands were outstretched like a man pleading to a judge.

I wanted to chime in, but Warren sealed my mouth with a momentary sidelong glance.

"Look, these people don't play down at the Creek. They see you in a golf cap and they'll know you're not for real."

"The Creek? I thought you'd never been there before. Hanging out in North Jackson?" Actually, Vaughn had lived in North Jackson all his life. "What have you been smoking?"

"I'm telling you. They don't play." Warren was firm. "Best bass fishing in the state. Maybe in the whole southeast."

Vaughn paused and rolled his eyes. He folded the yellow cap and stuck it in his back pocket. "Let's go." Turning to me, he muttered, "Del Gilbert, get that thing off your head before you get a rash. Looks like it's got a fungus on it."

Maynor Creek Water Park lay in a portion of the state I had never before visited. In Wayne County, just west of the Alabama border, the park was actually a small, artificially created, squid shaped lake fed by the rivulet of Maynor Creek. Stretched out lazily as a break among the pine forests and loam soil of the lower East Gulf Coastal Plain, the land around the lake was nearly as flat as the glassy milk-chocolate-colored surface.

Vaughn had asked Warren to drive and without waiting for a response had crawled into the back seat and opened a beer. Both ice chests were on the rear floorboard and both were packed with Miller High Life. Vaughn wedged himself down between the three rolled sleeping bags and was almost asleep before we were halfway to Mendenhall. Every now and then he would stir around, and with great economy of movement, flip open an ice chest lid, grab a beer, pop off a top, and suck it down in two or three gulps. By the time we hit Laurel, there were five empty bottles strewn over the back of the Jeep.

When we arrived I gathered the tents from around Vaughn, who was struggling to gain something close to a vertical position and extract his body from the rear of the Jeep. After two refusals he finally let me give him a hand out. As soon as his feet made contact with the ground he jerked away from me and maintained his balance only by bracing his arm against the side of the roll bar. Figuring that Vaughn was in no shape to do anything other than collapse, I had decided to set his tent up first and let him succumb to the forces of gravity and moonlight. "How much beer did you have?"

He swiveled his head in my direction with what appeared to be great effort and glared at me through a smile. "Seven, I think. Seven heaven. Give me seven. Maybe I'll take eleven."

"Seven?"

"Miller ponies. Seven ounces each." A roar of a belch. "Seven ounces. Seven beers. Must be my lucky number, Del Gilbert."

I looked at the bottles for a second or two. They were full grown twelve ounce horses. Not a pony in sight. "Seven beers," I stated. I scanned at least nine empties

"Never felt better, Del Gilbert." He looked like he was going to puke.

Where do you want your tent?" I asked.

"Right there," he pointed.

"Right there," I echoed. The plot of ground he chose was thickly matted with pine straw, twigs and cones. "How about over here," I suggested, nodding a few feet forward and left toward a splotch of flat sand unencumbered by fallen branches and pinecones. It was an area that had been purposely cleared by human hands for the very act of placing a tent.

Vaughn slapped a palm over his left eye and dragged it down his face until it rested beside his mouth, the attached fingers sprayed across his nose and lips like a net. Something close to anger had seeped into his posture. Maybe it was just indignation; in the pale light it was difficult to tell. "Damn you, Del Gilbert! I been outdoors since I was six: hunting, camping, fishing, crapping, hiking, surviving, and everything else you can do in the wilderness. I'm not just standing here like some frat boy afraid of getting some dirt on his khakis. You hear me?" He continued in this vein for several minutes, working himself up into a lather and stringing words together so quickly that he neither made sense, nor allowed enough time to breathe. The longer he continued, the more simultaneously animated and profane he was, until to hear him tell it, he was the closest thing to Jeremiah Johnson to ever come out of Hinds County.

In the end he sat down by the tire of his Jeep and panted like a mutt. After a moment of malicious hesitation I set up his tent in the smooth sandy spot. While doing so, I reflected that perhaps Vaughn's opinion of himself was as skewed as everyone else's. Growing up in a two-story Georgian at the end of a cul-de-sac smack dab in the middle of North Jackson did not qualify someone as a the next Jim Bridger, even if he did go to deer camp twice a year. One thing was for sure: Vaughn hadn't pulled that cussing crap on Elizabeth Langley or Mary Ellen Blakely. Granted, there were specific anatomical reasons why that was so, but it rankled me nonetheless to be on the receiving end of a hops inspired rant.

Despite the fact that I liked Vaughn, he was not really someone I considered a friend. He was more of a friendly acquaintance. No matter how thick the back slapping camaraderie between us at a given moment, it had all the permanence of a soap bubble. We could laugh and joke and trade tales, but none of it was predicated on a foundation of respect, and none of it was predictive of how we would act toward one another five minutes later. To be honest, I was jealous of Vaughn. He was getting away with murder, and it's fundamental to human nature that we would all like to get away with the most massive of sins, but we don't like to see anyone else get away with them. So, beyond the surface of jealousy lay the real root of my discontent: Vaughn's very existence, the way he lived his life in such a carelessly charmed manner, belied the central core of injustice in the universe - a polluting reality that ran beneath the surface of the human condition like a seam of granite. After I erected the tent and just before I staked it down, the devil got the best of me and I slid a pinecone underneath out of spite.

"All done," I announced.

He was as still as a stone and flopped like a rag doll on the rear tire. His tirade must have been the final flare up of energy his brain could expunge before the malted curtain of sleep came crashing down over his central nervous system. I lifted him up from under his arm pits and with moderate difficulty laid him in his tent, not noticing where he was in relation to the pinecone that I had already almost forgotten about.

The following morning, light was just beginning to break across the water when I stepped outside my tent and shook my body awake, pulling the stiffness from my arms like they were made from taffy. Vaughn was standing, his back to me, holding

a beer and gazing across the street out at the lake. I walked over, stood beside him and looked him up and down, trying to assess the level of his hangover. He was clear-eyed and mellow, sipping his beer and studying the lay of the land. He didn't take notice of me and for a long moment we stood in silence, beside each other like a couple of ill kempt mannequins in a store window.

"Best bass fishing in the state," he said still not turning toward me, but rather holding his bottle out to the lake like a pointer.

"So I hear," I replied.

"We better hit it." He dumped the dregs of his liquid breakfast into the sandy underbrush and moved back to his tent where I heard faint rummaging sounds as he gathered his equipment together.

In ten minutes the three of us were backing the boat into the water at the ramp, Vaughn maneuvering the Jeep while Sullivan and I made arm signals and unbelted the straps that lashed the boat to the trailer. Everything went surprisingly smooth. We spoke only when necessary and moved with efficiency, guiding the craft free of its binders and releasing it into the murky environment for which it was created. It reminded me of one of those nature shows where a group of marine biologists would release a floundering whale or dolphin back into the ocean after months of captivity. The people would sigh en masse as the creature settled back into the wet salty universe, as if they were translating the animal's response into human terms.

Sullivan walked up the ramp, hopped onto the bow and settled himself in the boat. I followed suit and sat rearward in a swivel chair as he started the trolling motor and edged us away from the ramp and toward a long wooden pier that ran 40 feet out from the shore to our left. Vaughn returned from parking the Jeep back at the campsite and slid off the pier to join us. We backed around in a semi-circle and putted away from the shore as the yellow ball of the sun crept over the tops of the broad pines.

"We're getting a late start," said Vaughn. He was squinting, but more resigned than discontent.

Warren grunted in acknowledgement. "They'll still be there," he muttered.

We were far enough from shore now to pick up some speed, so Sullivan stepped to the rear, punched a few buttons to prime the Evenrude, then yanked on the pull cord twice. The motor sputtered to life with a muffled growl sending up a cough of blue smoke. Sullivan squatted for a moment listening to the engine buzz. Satisfied, he returned to the wheel and drove us out into the deep water.

When we were equidistant from either shore, he released the throttle and let the boat draw down to a crawl. He and Vaughn were silent and both were making a methodical scan of the shoreline. His eyes still searching, Vaughn pulled out a Skoal can and started slinging it back and forth, his forefinger whacking on the metal top with each snap of his wrist, packing the tobacco into a tight mass. He popped the top off with his thumb and pinched out a dip the size of my big toe, tucked it in his front lip, replaced the lid, and slipped the can back in his jeans with the smooth practiced execution of a professional. His gaze had locked on something and I noticed Warren had done the same.

"I reckon I see it, Sullivan."

"I'm on it. The stumps about 20 degrees off starboard."

"Best I can see from here anyway." Vaughn sloshed a fountain of brown spit into the

already brown water.

The engine went from putter to rumble behind me as Sullivan gave it some gas. We rode slowly toward a concentrated mass of dead hardwoods and stumps just off the far shore to our right. No other boats were in the vicinity. Fifty yards out, Warren slowed us back to a trot and we moved with caution up to the shallow water. At some point the engine stopped and Vaughn threw an anchor over the side to plant us.

"Now, Del Gilbert," said Vaughn, "what we're hunting for here is your classic largemouth bass, also called bigmouth, bucketmouth, or black bass among other names." He swiveled in his seat and placed his rod and tackle box to his left, between us. "They call 'em largemouth because their jawbone extends back behind their eyeball, and you can tell 'em apart from other bass pretty quick by their mouth and by their scale pattern. They have a black spotted stripe that runs down the side of their body from gill cover to tail fin."

"Vaughn, you act like Adler's never been fishing before," said Warren.

"It's alright. I don't mind him talking."

"Well, he hasn't," said Vaughn.

I slapped my knees and looked at Warren, but he was shaking his head in denial.

"Where's your tackle box Del Gilbert? You don't even have a fishing hat. You let Sullivan talk you into wearing that camouflage vomit looking thing. And that rod of yours looks like it's never been outside of a box. I'll bet if I was to ask you if you're packing a knife to cut bait, you couldn't say yes. Me, I've got three knives on me. Don't sweat it. Just listen up." He nudged a Folgers can my way with his boot. "Take that mesh off the top and grab a worm."

Obediently, I flipped the mesh cap off the coffee can and reached down into the squirming ball of earthworms pulling up three in my hand and flicking all but the fattest one back into the can.

"Now," said Vaughn, dipping his hand down into the worms and snagging a plump one of his own. "Make your mama and daddy real proud of all that tuition money they're spending to send you to Savannah by remembering your junior high anatomy class. If you can't think back that far, then watch what I do and do a Xerox. People might say I'm crazy, but do not, I say, don't hook that worm through the head. You'll wipe out what little brain he has and what you'll get is no wiggle. If you don't want wiggle, then why are you messing around with live bait in the first place?"

I held my worm up for a closer inspection. It had been four years since I had dissected one of these creatures, and short of putting him on the floor of the boat and watching him crawl, I was at a loss to tell one end from the other.

"That wide band on him is called the clitellum, and it's closer to his head than his tail. See it?"

I nodded. I peaked at Warren. He had one eyebrow cocked, an expression of bemusement dripping down his cheeks.

"Locate his head and you'll see a hole in it near the tip. That's his mouth and it's on the bottom of his body. Okay? His brain is on top of that and his heart is behind the brain. If you run your hook up into either organ, you'll kill him. If you kill him, no wiggle." Vaughn held up a rounded hook. "Stick him in the top, just above the clitellum and make the hook exit far enough back from the head, so as to not hit the vital stuff." He did it with his typical Vaughnlike smoothness in no more than a

second. "Voila. Also, don't poke the hook too far into his body, or you'll sever his nerve cord."

"No wiggle."

"Correct Del Gilbert. You are now informed. Go slowly and do it right."

Vaughn watched as I attempted to duplicate his deftness. The hook came out crooked and tore the back of the worm. "Should I get another one?"

"It'll do. By the end of the day you'll be an expert."

"Yeah, by the end of the day, you better damn well be an expert," said Warren. "Cause you'll have to replace those worms every five minutes after they swim off that hook." He pulled up a cricket from his bait can. "You wanna know how to hook a cricket? Just shove the hook in through his back, just so, and bring the point out below his head. Bam!"

"So, why would my worm swim off the hook while your cricket stays put?" demanded Vaughn.

"Because your worm has a thin skin and my cricket has an exoskeleton, donkeyhead. That worm'll pull his body right off that hook, or your average bass will swim along and do it for him. The odds of the bass striking my hook are about twice what yours are, I'd say."

"Well, I guess we'll see Sullivan," grumbled Vaughn. Looking back at me he said while casting, "Try my way first and see if I'm not right."

"Sure." I swung my hands back and in a studied imitation of what I had observed, I whipped my rod forward and released my line. It sailed out from the boat and I immediately knew I had misjudged the force of the throw. My line went high into the hanging branches of a gnarled tree and attached itself as if covered with glue. I gave a futile tug, but the line didn't waver. I could see my bait dangling from the end like the sad victim of a worm lynching.

"Cut it," said Warren handing me a knife. "It's alright. It takes time to get it right. Tie another hook on there and try it again."

Slicing my line free, I stared at Vaughn and felt a certainty in my heart that he had never cast his bait into a birch tree. He had been perfect from the beginning. It was as if we were two different creatures living in two different worlds, fated to interact but immune to the cross pollination that should have come with contact. "How much time?" I asked.

"It's different for everybody."

"Isn't that the truth." I knotted my new hook as best I could and reached for the Folgers can. The worms writhed blindly against their cylindrical boundary, one over the other in a tangled mass of life.

William D. Gill was born and raised in central Mississippi, and feels that this might be his primary qualification for becoming a writer. He has lived for the past 17 years in Kentucky and currently resides in Bowling Green with his wife and children. His essay on Memphis artist Guy Cobb was featured in *storySouth*. His short story *Confidence* and children's story *The Monkey and the Diamond* were published in the United Kingdom by Leaf Books Ltd. When not writing, he enjoys long distance running, cycling, and thunderstorms. He is currently at work on a novel, *The Noxubee Refuge*.