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## Sea Roots

by John Oliver Hodges

Gravy Eyes needed studio time—the plan was work hard, save dough, get Gravy a well-made CD to sell in Tallahassee. Or sell in Atlanta, GA, sell it there. Boy had talent. Carried his beat-up Harmony with him all up and down the shoulders of Highway 319, and along the banks of the Sopchoppy River. When Gravy played and sang, he arranged his body into relaxed-looking positions—another facet of his genius, the impression he gave off that what he did was plain rain, easy breezy. People drifting by in boats looked shoreward to see a scruff-haired white boy in overalls worn over bare flesh in the crook of a tree, one leg dangling down, wow, check him out, just a-strummin' and a-croonin', making shit up and remembering it for later to write down and stuff into his folder made fat to bursting with song. Once Gravy Eyes had recorded his stuff, Jail and the others were sure, he would hit the top of the charts. They all would be rich.

So . . . they gathered the old mirrors left behind by Mr. Sprague, a man who never threw anything away. Mr. Sprague died of a massive stroke that winter while changing out the mailbox somebody bat-slammed. They knew they could have stolen off with Mr. Sprague's mirrors—they were just piled up in his barn—but decided to hold true to the honesty virtue. They told Mrs. Sprague, in her eighties, of their plan. She said he wouldn't like it, but wasn't much he could do about it now, was there? No ma'am they said. Clay then drove them to Eastpoint in his brown LTD and they loaded the trunk with oyster shells. Keisha's dad was a master carpenter. They borrowed his hot glue guns and spent several sweaty afternoons in his woodshop decorating the frames of the mirrors with oyster shells. That really spiced up their product. On the weekend they rented a table at the Tallahassee flea market and made a killing. Sold all twenty-three mirrors the first day. Since they had the table for Sunday too, they needed to figure out what else to sell. On the return drive to Sopchoppy they tossed around ideas but weren't coming up with much. They stopped at IGA for sandwich meats and potato salad. These items they took to Jail's trailer, where she already had some bread, and mustard and relish.

They enjoyed their food on Jail's porch. They ate, and then Clay suggested they head over to the river. They could chant, he said, channel the energy of the sea roots. The sea roots would tell them what to do about that empty table, what to fill it with, how to make a second killing. He said, "All them arms, man, and them laigs and toes and shit, you know what I be saying?"

"I still don't get it," Jail said.

"They like growed down into the sand and heaped up in a pile and shit so you gots like these roots down there growing around like snakes and

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shit.”

“Snakes? Roots ain’t no snakes,” Keisha said. She sounded alarmed.

“Naw, man, you gots to see it in the lights of reason,” Clay said, and explained again how the elongated toes and fingers and arms piled up in a heap looked like a brain, and functioned like a brain, only this brain held the intelligence of all the brains thrown out to sea, so was very smart and powerful. “It’s down there still,” Clay said.

Sounded like a great idea, but Jail’s mother who lived in the house across the field stepped down to her Buick, got in it, and honked three times, not quick in succession like she normally did when summoning Jail, but three long obnoxious honks. If Jail were to ignore her mother, she’d pay hell later, so she told her friends to wait for her on the trail, then walked through the field to see about Nell.

Nell had started the Buick to run the air. Obviously Nell wanted Jail to lickety-split get her behind over there, and wouldn’t she be pleased if Jail prostrated herself at her mother’s feet and kissed them? Jail was an adult, was not going to jeopardize her dignity for the sake of her mother’s desire to feel superior over everybody in the world. Nell’s behavior was so distasteful that Jail walked slower than normal. Upon passing under the live oak boughs, her mother killed the engine and stepped out. “Jennifer Lee!” she said, and she said, “The nerve!”

“A nerve,” Jail said, “is a microscopic nodule under the skin that lets you to know when somebody touches you.”

“I see you came back from the city. You are not even dressed. Look at your feet.”

“It’s summer, Mama.”

“It’s dirty and I don’t like it. You know I don’t like it but do it. Are you a dog? Are you a dirt hound? What’s that? You’re not gonna answer me? That’s because you know I’m right, but I’m telling you, the least you could do is take them inside so as I won’t have to hear about it later from the folks at church. It’s just unbelievable. I can’t believe how disrespectful you are. That is so inconsiderate.”

“We’re celebratin’, Mama.”

“Celebratin’?”

Jail told her mother of the mirrors, of the trip to Eastpoint, how they gathered shells and glued them to the mirrors, how they made a killing in Tallahassee. She thought her mother would be impressed.

“Well,” her mother said, “it’s a good thing you made some money. From now on I’m charging you a hundred dollars a month to live with me. If

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ever I see a black boy hanging around here it'll be an extra hundred. I can't believe that you would humiliate me like this. After all I've told you!"

"Thank you, Mama," Jail said, and walked away.

"Jennifer Lee!" Nell cried.

In anger were the only times Nell used her daughter's Christian name. For years Jail had just been just J.L., but it sounded so much like jail that finally everybody just called her Jail, all her teachers at school, everybody.

Jail stopped, but did not turn around. Her heartbeat grew faint. She felt like crying, but knew that would make her mother happy. "What?" she said to the camellia tree.

"I don't have that money by tomorrow evening, I'll evict ye!"

Jail listened to her mother's heels cross the driveway. When the front door slammed, she took off at a sprint through the tall grass. If she could get to her friends fast enough, she wouldn't have to think about this new insult.

Jail adored her friends, Clay in particular, but Clay claimed to be gay. Everybody knew he'd never been with a guy. Jail suspected it was a matter of first come first serve. If Clay got with a woman first, he'd find out he'd never been gay to begin with, and call off the whole gay manifesto thing. It was no secret Jail crushed for Clay.

Jail tore into the woods, kicking up sand like a bulldog with flippers for paws. When she espied her gang down under the ancient magnolia beyond the straightaway she felt relief. As she got up close to them she tripped and fell into the sand and screamed.

"From the sky Jail fell," Gravy Eyes half-yodeled, "but I will not sing of hailstones and gall."

Jail's dramatic display prompted Clay to drop to his knees beside her. He put his hand on her shoulder. He said, "Jail," and by the quaver in his voice Jail knew he cared for her. "You all right?" he said with such sincerity. It was like Clay thought Jail was at Death's door, what a riot. Jail jumped up and swept Clay up so he was cradled in her arms. She swung Clay round and round laughing until dizzy and they collapsed.

"What on earth?" Keisha said, her face orange in the slanting light, sweaty, smooth, her cornrows asparkle with miniscule moisture droplets.

"I love you guys!" Jail cried out, but already the words of her mother, on tiny little fast little legs, were catching up with her. The words jumped

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onto signboards that her mother then nailed into the soft tissue of Jail's brain, splintery particleboard cutouts reading EVICTION and FREELoader and BLACK BOY.

Gravy Eyes stopped picking the Harmony. "I say we bump up, what say?"

"Yeah man, cool," Clay said. He stood and was brushing off his red long pants and his checkered button-up, reclaiming his cherished look of tidy. Jail missed the feel of his body. It had been nice while it lasted.

"Let's hit the spot," Keisha said. "I wanna rush and look at the water."

"Yeah," Clay said. "Let's see what the sea roots got to say on tomorrow."

The friends meandered through the pines on down to the river. The sun dropped behind the trees. In the twilight the river wore a purple mist, broken here and there by momentary cracks of darkness made by the slow thoughtless current. A few stars had come out in the clear pale sky.

On the trunk of the fallen tree up on the cliff overlooking the river the friends sat. Jail passed out cigarettes and they lit up, Gravy Eyes cutting lines on the back of his overturned Harmony. Enough remained for each to snort two decent lines, Gravy Eyes said, but from here on out it was cold turkey for him. He liked the creativity it gave him, but didn't want ever to look like Tyrone. Tyrone was the guy they bought from. Gravy Eyes had noticed new wrinkles on his face. His eyes, he said, appeared to be getting sucked down into his head. "Sides," Gravy Eyes said, and paused, unsure on how to finish his sentence.

"Tell us," Keisha said.

A few new bothersome signboards were already getting slammed down into Jail's brain. Jail wasn't sure how many signboards it took to cause permanent brain damage, but she secretly hoped Gravy Eyes would change the dumb subject, talk about clouds, shit, worms, the ice in Finland.

"I don't know," Gravy Eyes said. He said, "just look at that river."

They looked at it.

"See how it don't stop? You can't dam it. Do, it'll pour over the top."

"Go ahead, say it," Jail said.

"I was accepted into the Tallahassee Community College."

The river poured along and poured along. The river poured along until it

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reached the Gulf of Mexico, and the Gulf of Mexico was attached to the Atlantic Ocean and, come to think of it, all the oceans of the world.

“That’s badass,” Keisha said.

“I’m moving to town next week. I’ll be staying with my uncle till I get my own place.”

“Ooooh, but I always knew you was smart,” Keisha said.

“Naw man, I ain’t smart or nothing like that. It’s just something to do, you know what I mean?”

“I want me a cell phone real bad,” Keisha said.

“Shit, girl,” Jail blurted out, “Why you need a cell phone?”

“Stay connected,” Keisha said. “Why does I gots to be last in line?”

“Okay,” Clay said, “what with the car washes we did and the mirrors, we got two hundred eight dollars.” Clay was their banker. He said, “Divided four ways that make eighty dollars each.”

“I can’t believe this shit,” Jail said.

“Look at the river,” Gravy Eyes insisted.

“Sides,” Clay said.

What? Another sides? Everybody had a sides. Jail’s only sides was she had to pay her mother a hundred dollars now. That wasn’t so bad. Who knew but that she could convince Nell to let her do extra chores. Already she mowed the property with the riding mower and washed the front windows and polished the heirlooms. Surely there was something extra she could do. Her mother once mentioned that she could save a lot of money could she get somebody at home—*hint hint*—to do her nails.

Clay said, “I been meaning to tell y’all?”

“You too?” Keisha said.

“I got this opportunity to work on a cruise ship leaving out Miami to the Virgin Islands and shit.”

“When does that start?” Jail asked.

“Two and half weeks,” Clay said.

“Gimme that guitar,” Jail said.

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Gravy Eyes passed Jail the guitar, and with her own special straw that she pulled from her back pocket, snorted her two allotted lines. She looked down at the river as the others snorted theirs. It was over. The piebald animal that they were had been led to slaughter. For the last six months they had been tight. They were the RIVER KIDZ, and they had spray painted their name on walls in Panacea, Eastpoint, and Carabelle. When people saw their name, their brains ignited with mystery: *Oh, who are they?* It didn't seem right for their name to be on display if they no longer existed—it would be a lie.

"I'm glad I told you," Gravy Eyes said.

"Aw man, don't worry about it, it's all good," Clay said, the traitor, him acting like he didn't fully intend, from the beginning, to work that cruise ship job. Already Jail had pictures in her mind of Clay dressed in his cruise ship uniform, and he was about the cutest thing. He wore a red bow tie, and in her mind she saw some black guy, one of the wealthy riders on the Whatever Boat, unbuttoning Clay's shirt as the ocean breeze misted their lips with salt. It wasn't any kind of mystery what gay people did. Jail understood that Clay would be the one to take it up the ass. To think of some guy fucking Clay in his cute brown ass was a bit much.

"I guess now I'm gonna be a crackho," Jail said matter-of-factly, speaking for the first time of the fear she'd had for going on a year, ever since she graduated from Eastpoint High. Before she'd started hanging with her pals she'd had some sorry moments, the worst being the time she woke up in a condo on Saint George Island. She opened her eyes and saw the ceiling with its tiny Styrofoam balls all over it. The man on top of her was only half asleep. Through her peripheral vision she could tell that he had long brown hair banded in a bun on the back of his head. She heard ocean waves slapping the shore, and felt the salt breezes flowing in thorough a window somewhere. What she'd remembered from the night before was drinking Tequila shots at an Eastpoint bar with her boyfriend. She'd smoked some rock early in the evening. Somehow she ended up at Harry's Bar on the island where a cover band played new wave favorites from the eighties. She remembered dancing. The half-asleep guy started moving. He was taking his time, she realized. For all she knew he could have been at it for hours. She knew it wasn't her boyfriend. He weighed a ton more. The cologne was unfamiliar. Talk of sucky. Later, after weeks of trying to forget her life, Jail decided that if she had to relive that experience, the correct thing would have been to bite the guy's neck like a vampire might bite the guy's neck, only instead of sucking blood out of him all peaceful the way vampires do in movies, she would rip out a chunk of muscle and blood would squirt all over the place from the unfixable jugular. Instead Jail lay below him like an invalid, hoping he would blow his load. After so much stopping and starting she finally reached her hands up and set them on the guy's shoulders. That's when he reared back and she saw it was Coach Blanton's intern from Eastpoint High. He was also a musician who wrote songs about drinking women and beloved dogs and other country themes. Had his own band and a CD that he gave to several students. Jail was one of the lucky ones. She

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liked his music. He was a nice guy. He'd made several comments on the volleyball court that made it seem like he smoked weed. Now, though, Jail felt a vomit coming on. She tried leaning her face over the mattress, but Coach Gray picked up his pace and got down harder on her. He thought she was trying to get away. The puke left her mouth when he took his bliss—it fell back on her and she coughed and he pulled out with a sort of sissy cry and hopped to the kitchen for a cereal bowl, brought it back, and she puked into the bowl. The bowl overflowed.

"Don't say that," Clay said.

"Stay," Jail said.

"You are the blessed one," Clay said.

"You can be my pimp," Jail said, and went into a monologue about her mother, how now, because she'd seen a black boy in the yard, she had to pay a hundred dollars to keep the trailer. If not for Clay none of that would be true. Clay owed it to her to be her pimp.

"What about me?" Keisha protested.

"Your mother needs to chill out," Gravy Eyes said.

"State the obvious." Jail felt mean, rejected, hopeless, on the edge of the old awful desperation. That Coach Gray dude, first name Cedric, after he had escorted her to the shower and she had come out wrapped in a bright red towel, a color she hated, proposed to her. From what dumb plum did that rot come from? He said he'd thought of her ever since seeing her for the first time in those hot black silky gym shorts she wore during P.E. He said that at heart she was a good girl, he knew this for a fact, but it might be her only chance to avoid becoming a crackho. Ain't that what happened to most Sopchoppy girls? With that she'd had to agree, and she sat down in the cushy blue couch thinking of it. His offer was good for now, Cedric said, though he might change his mind in a week. He poured her coffee, sweetened it with a honeybear, eyeing her as he stirred. She didn't see her clothes anywhere, so asked for them. They were down in the truck, he said, and fried her eggs, gave her aspirin, not putting them in her hand when she held it out, but saying, "open." so that he could toss them in there. They spent the afternoon on the beach, swam in the Atlantic. As night came on they drank beer, even though she wasn't legal. Later in the condo, again the dick came out. This time he wanted her to "work it," and was very vocal. Turned out he had a really filthy mouth.

Of course Jail was not going to marry Cedric Gray. Had she not been so insulted by his insistence that without him she would become a crackho, perhaps she would have given it more thoughtful consideration, but Coach Gray, she decided, Coach Cedric Gray, was what her mother referred to as "chaff."

Now all her friends were ditching her.

“Look to me like Jail need to lighten up,” Keisha said.

“I’m lightened up,” Jail said, “My whole body is filled with light. My body is a bonfire sending bright rays into all parts of the world: China, Africa. I hold the light. I give the world its heartbeat. I am the chosen angel with a sword that she is about to chop the world in two by.”

“Watch out!” Clay said, “Jail done snorted up some good shit. She on a roll, baby.”

“The light that seeks out creeps and drug dealers in the corners they hide in, then incinerates them. The only place for chaff is the furnace.”

“Don’t incinerates the drug dealers!” Clay cried.

“I don’t know what I’m saying,” Jail said.

“Crazy talk,” Keisha said.

“Time to stop saying,” Clay said, “it’s time to take a listen, you know what I be saying?”

“The sea roots!” Gravy Eyes shouted.

“That’s what I be talking about,” Clay said. “The sea roots don’t play around. You can’t fuck with the sea roots, man, it will mess you up if you even think about it.”

Keisha was shaking her head. She said, “The sea roots is what? What did you call it? The collective power of the slaves that fell overboard?”

“Naw man, they wasn’t no *fell* overboard nothing, they was pushed over the side of that boat and left for the sharks to eat. You gots to get the history straight here, girl.”

“So what you’re saying is that all the dead drowned people floated along the bottom of the ocean to the same spot?”

“That’s it, girl, it’s them fangers and toes all grown into a brain like what I was telling you about. Set still. When you hear it call you name you gots to jump down into that water, but first we got to let it know we here, understand what I be saying? Let’s join hands, people.”

They joined hands and chanted: *Sea roots humba humba hey, get your ass over here right now, humba hey. Sea roots humba humba hey, get your ass over here right now, humba hey.*

Then they were quiet, and Jail was the first to hear her name called. “Miss Jail,” it whispered. Strangely, the voice sounded like her mother’s.



She dove off the cliff into the water, spearing downwards, her ears picking up pressure. In the blackness she flipped upright and clamped her nose and depressurized. Her feet touched the soggy river bottom, and something grabbed her, felt like a wiggly root coiling around her ankle and partway up her calf. It squeezed, and she heard her mother's voice again. It said, "See there? The thing for you is to kill yourself. It's going to be so funny. I hate to laugh at the people burning up in Hell, but you had your chance with Jesus."

"Shutup!" Jail shouted, and reached down and brushed away the weeds. She shot upwards, climbed out of the river onto the bank in her wet clothes.

"Damn, man," Clay said, "You was down there a long time, girl."

"I had a vision," Jail said. "I saw myself on the flea market table in my bra and panties. I was for sell." She wanted Clay to stay is all. Just what could she do to make Clay stay? Her mind flashed upon an image of him chained by his neck to a tree in the forest. That was weird. It would bother her later, but she could blame the meth. She could blame her mother. She could blame the sea roots. If Jail cared about herself, she needed to make Clay stay.

"I wish you'd stop that shit," Keisha said.

"So do I," Jail said.

"I told you you need to shush," Keisha said, and stripped down to her bikini. She grabbed the stick and pulled the rope in and swung out over the river and expertly dropped in, flipping over midair so that she hit the water like a strong graceful bird diving for fish.

Once they had all communed with the sea roots they sat side by side in the dark on the fallen tree, talking about their visions that had nothing to do with selling stuff on the table tomorrow. It all sounded selfish to Jail—the sea roots told Gravy Eyes that he was the new Bob Dylan! As such, he had an enormous responsibility to foster his talent.

Jail said, "You all can't do this to me!"

"Stop!" Clay said.

"I didn't finish what I was—"

"She wants us to feel bad," Gravy Eyes said, "wants to lay down a guilt trip."

"Y'all need to shut yo mouths," Keisha said.

"Thank you, Keisha," Jail said, but she had lost momentum. Maybe they were right? She was jealous, sure. She wanted to hold them all down.

She had succeeded in destroying the mood. They sat in the dark and listened to the forest, Jail replaying the day in her mind, their fun at the market selling the cool oyster shell mirrors. Seemed like a lifetime ago, but the table kept coming back to her. She saw it wreathed in darkness, but tomorrow the light would flood in, revealing its golden particleboard surface in perceptible increments. The flea market would fill with people looking to buy nice things to decorate their homes with, or to dress up in, watches and incense, pants for children. They would see boiled peanuts in bowls, take you a free sample, and see computer nerds sell software, hard drives, Dan the Chicken Man with his caged roosters and rabbits, and the Chinese women selling backscratchers and eyeglasses. People would see rifles and belts, but they would not see the River Kidz.

"Y'all screwed me over," Jail said, "but I will accept it. It ain't no big deal. I was having a panic attack. Sorry."

"You have tons to be thankful for," Gravy Eyes put in.

"Really?"

"You're healthy. My mom has cancer, wears a wig, shits her pants. I could tell you more."

"We all gots to start somewheres," Clay said.

"Our plan was to do it together," Jail reminded them.

"I just want a cell phone," Keisha said. "I don't think that's too much to ask for, just a cell phone, that's all."

"Once I get my money from the cruise ship I'm coming back to buy my mama a screened-in porch. Who knows? Maybe I will buy the materials and build it myself."

"Oh, my dad will do it," Keisha said.

"Is he expensive?"

"You met my dad," Keisha said.

"Yeah, but I don't know if he charge a lot. I ain't gonna be doling out no hundred dollar bills, baby."

"I wanna poke somebody," Jail said, and poked Clay with her finger. Clay laughed and she poked him again. He was a lot smaller than her. She was a tall girl, or woman, she was a woman, had been. If she wanted she could squash Clay into a ball and throw him back into the river. She loved his smell, it was like the smell of feet mixed with cantaloupe, or something that was orange and fruity. She loved his hair, what her mother called burr. Jail had touched it on many occasions,

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running her hand over it in a friendly way. Seeing Clay now in the dark, him looking out at the river, Jail wanted to lick his mouth.

“Clay is going to be a big hit on the Love Boat,” she said.

“Clay is dynamite,” Keisha said.

And that was the end of it, the end of the gang. They hugged each other as they normally did when parting and went their separate ways, off to their homes. Jail had tried to stall Clay, but Clay was off. Alone on the log in the moonlight, Jail stared at the rope swing hanging over the river. The loop at the bottom looked like a noose. She could stick her head in there if she wanted, but she wanted another bump. She thought of going to Tyrone’s. Tyrone liked her. Tyrone would give her shit on credit. He had already offered for her to suck his dick. Jail knew that the offer remained, that it wasn’t in danger of going anywhere such as Coach Gray’s marriage proposal had been. In all this Jail saw herself sitting on the pity-potty in the dark, and guessed she was just like what Gravy Eyes had been hinting at, a spoiled brat. She didn’t have to stand for it, so she ambled back to her trailer. She shut the door and flipped on the lights and sat in the couch and was too bored to live. She needed somebody to talk to, Clay preferably, but Clay was with his mother. Probably. If it was good for him, it ought to be good for her, so she grabbed the crescent wrench off the coffee table and crossed the field to her mother’s house, pulled the key from under the mat, let herself in, and made to her mother’s bedroom. She flipped on the lights. Her mother was asleep, face lax. Slobber seeped out, but why had the Sea Roots spoken in her mother’s voice?

Jail flipped off her mother’s bedroom lights and crept to the living room and curled up on the couch, clutching the crescent wrench like a stuffed doll. Her mother would find her there in the morning and demand an explanation. Jail would tell her that she had come to trim her toenails. “With a wrench?” her mother might say, and Jail would think up something funny to say about the wrench. She wasn’t sure why she had brought it with her, but she was good at painting toenails. She would paint her mother’s a color to remember, a color that brought to mind the unseen creatures that slithered around at the bottoms of rivers.

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**John Oliver Hodges** lives in Brooklyn and teaches writing at Montclair State University in New Jersey. His books are *The Love Box* (Livingston Press, 2013) and *War of the Crazies* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2011). The locales of his stories range from South Korea to Alaska to Mississippi to New York to Florida. If you liked “Sea Roots,” consider checking out “Gatorepathy,” another of his Florida stories over at *Stickman Review*: <http://stickmanreview.com/V13N1/V13N1contents/hodges.html>

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