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THE CARP

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The Guy, as they came to refer to him, was from Arkansas, one of those states down south that George could never quite place on the map in his mind. Was it next to Texas? Alabama? Kansas? He pictured dirt roads beneath a white hot sky and scrubby pines, one- room shacks and hot springs, men in overalls chugging moonshine in pickup trucks with confederate flag decals on the windshields. No matter how many times he reminded himself that Bill Clinton hailed from Arkansas, he could only picture the president's drug-addled half-brother, with his mullet and ill-fitting suits.

"The Guy strikes me as a little eccentric," Ray said as they drove to meet him. "But he's okay, I think."

"Eccentric," George repeated. "That means he's crazy, right?"

No answer from Ray. He was behind the wheel of his 1979 Cutlass Supreme, a tank of a car that left a brown cloud of noxious exhaust fumes in its formidable wake. They were somewhere on the New Jersey Turnpike, headed toward a pre-arranged meeting with the Guy at the Walt Whitman service area.

"I mean, the Guy's not gonna murder us, is he?" George asked. "He's not gonna cut us up into little pieces and feed us to the alligators, is he?"

Ray laughed the way he always did when he thought George was acting paranoid. "No way," he said. "The Guy came highly recommended by some people I know. Besides, I don't think they have gators in Arkansas."

George stared straight ahead. He was anxious whenever he had anything to do with some people Ray knew. Last year the two of them drove to somewhere in Canada—eight hours into the thick woods—to buy some pot from some of those very people. The pot was intended for George's Uncle Hank, who had pancreatic cancer. Ray said it was incredible stuff, hydroponic or something, and would keep Uncle Hank in a pleasant haze. Anyway, the people Ray knew turned out to be a family of in-bred moose hunters who terrified George with their guns and long, bushy beards and unbelievably cluttered cabin where they lived on top of each other in a green cloud of marijuana smoke. They more or less forced George and Ray to sample the product—"We don't like it," the biggest one said in that weird accent of theirs, "if our customers leave without trying it out, eh?"—which was every bit as powerful as advertised, and at the border George was so worried that the customs agent would smell it on them that he nearly exploded in a fit of paranoia. He remained so tense all the way home that when they finally arrived his

entire body was sore. And then Uncle Hank refused to smoke the stuff, saying it was against his ethics to break the law like that. (Two months later, writhing in pain, he died.)

"The Guy's not coming all the way up from Arkansas for us, is he?" George asked. Not that he was worried about the Guy being inconvenienced; he just didn't want there to be too much pressure on them to go ahead with the transaction. He didn't want the Guy to get all bent out of shape if they changed their minds.

"Nah," Ray said. "He's got a lot of business up here."

"Really?" George had a hard time believing that.

"You'd be surprised, man," Ray answered.

They had left home three hours ago, and once again they were breaking the law. Instead of marijuana, this time it was carp—silver carp, to be exact, the kind that eats algae. The plan was to buy five of them from the Guy, at \$18 each, then introduce the fish—in violation of DEP rules—into Lake Tawaba.

Everyone in the whole neighborhood complained endlessly about the algae that bloomed in the lake over the summer, and how it prevented them from swimming on hot days, not to mention the smell and unsightliness. George's wife, Shelley, was one of the loudest and most bitter of the complainers. She and George had bought their home during the winter three years ago, unaware that, come June, the algae would bloom and spread like wildfire until the entire lake was covered in a disgusting green slime. Every year George tried to minimize the importance of the algae problem, calling it natural and not a big deal, but in truth it grossed him out to see the green stuff, as thick and craggy as an elephant's hide, floating atop the undulating water. And now he was going to do something about it.

He looked over and saw that Ray was staring at him. He would do that sometimes, even while driving 75 miles per hour on the turnpike.

"Don't sweat it, man," Ray said, a wide grin erupting in the middle of his graying beard. "You won't get in any trouble."

"Very funny."

By "trouble," George knew Ray meant not the law but Shelley. He could just picture her face if she knew what he was up to. She would scrunch up her mouth so that her lips disappeared, and those crow's feet wrinkles would sprout next to her eyes. Then she would say, "Ge-o-rge," drawing it out into two or sometimes three syllables, before launching into a harangue about how he should know better than to go along with Ray on one of his cockamamie schemes.

"Seriously," Ray maintained, "this is an in-and-out, under the radar, totally covert operation here. We'll be home in time for supper, and the missus will never be the wiser."

Shelley had grown up in a very conservative WASP family in the Midwest, where she'd had little or no contact with characters like Ray. For one thing, she'd never met anyone before with no discernible source of income, who appeared to live from day to day—or even hour to hour—rather than following some master plan as dictated by family tradition or, at the very least, a college career counselor. The whole idea of it made her nervous and distrustful.

"I'm not worried about that," George said, remembering how he'd told Shelley he was going to a music store in New York with Ray, who was supposedly looking for a new guitar.

"Whatever you say, man."

It was George's participation in Ray's rather unconventional Big Ideas that really drove Shelley insane. Before last year's excursion to Canada, for instance, there was the windmill incident. Inspired by an article he'd read in one of his environmentally-themed magazines, Ray decided one day to erect a windmill on his roof. It was not only his own electric bills that would decrease, he declared, but any extra wind-generated electricity that flowed out to the local grid would lower the neighborhood's bills as well. George considered this a noble experiment, and decided to help his friend. For several days in a row they climbed up Ray's rickety ladder onto the roof and hammered together long pieces of wood into a crude but recognizably windmill-like structure based on a photo in the magazine. Not accustomed to hard labor, Ray would occasionally produce a few cold bottles of beer and some locally-grown marijuana—purchased from the Turner kid across the lake, and not nearly as strong as that Canadian weed—and a "coffee break" would be taken right there on the roof. Normally, George did not indulge in mind-altering substances before sundown, but then he'd never been very resistant to peer pressure. One day, after a longer break than usual, and as he was gazing up at their work—the main body of the windmill had been constructed and all that needed to be done was to place the rotor at the top—he was overcome with lightheadedness, lost his footing, and tumbled toward the edge of the roof like a bucket. Fortunately, he managed to grab hold of the rain gutter and was able to hang on until Ray moved the ladder over to his dangling legs. Still, Shelley made him promise to say no next time Ray asked him to go along on one of his adventures. (Two years later, Ray still had not been able to figure out how to hook up the windmill to the generator.)

"There's Route 73," Ray noted as they chugged past the turnoff. "Almost there."

The Walt Whitman service area was supposed to be between interchanges 4 and 3, southbound, just across the river from Philadelphia. George had only passed this way once before, on another Ray-inspired adventure, this one to Atlantic City. Ray had been reading books on blackjack and insisted he had a surefire system. Between the two of them they went on to lose more than \$500, plus the money Ray got from hocking his old wedding ring at one of those "Cash for Gold" places. Ray reached over and turned up the radio. The Mamas and the Papas' "Monday, Monday" blared from the one working speaker, located in the passenger side door. He sang along in a surprisingly sweet tenor voice.

George first met Ray when he and Shelley were on a walk around the lake not long after moving in. It was the first nice day of Spring and the algae had not yet bloomed. As they neared Ray's ramshackle cottage on the lake road, they heard someone singing and strumming an acoustic guitar. There was Ray on his patio in a lawnchair, playing Cat Stevens songs, a pitcher of margaritas at his side.

"Howdy!" he called out. "Can I interest you in a margarootie?"

George and Shelley spent the next two hours listening to Ray play songs, gossip about the neighbors, and complain about how the lake association was too cheap and lazy to do anything about the algae situation.

"What algae situation?" Shelley asked.

And that was the first they heard of the curse of Lake Tawaba.

From then on, not three days went by without Ray calling or, better yet, stopping by to say hello and occasionally recruit George for his latest project. Sometimes they just sat out on George's deck, drinking and playing songs until late at night, while Shelley steamed inside. Inevitably, after any number of tequila shots, Ray would drag up one or both of his favorite topics—his ex-wife and the algae problem. About the former he would gripe and moan and express regrets. About the latter he would gripe and moan and try to think up some way to counteract

nature. Apparently there were chemical remedies that had been considered by the lake association, but they were expensive and there was the fact that they were chemical.

"We need to find an organic solution to this, man," Ray would say.

This went on for three years. Then, last month, Ray arrived on George's doorstep in an even more excited state than usual.

"Hypothalmichthys molitrix!" he exclaimed.

"Excuse me?" George said.

Ray waved a copy of the local alternative newspaper in George's face and said, "Check it out, man!"

Nestled between a schedule of upcoming peace rallies and advertisements for Asian massage parlors was a brief article about the algae-devouring silver carp.

"The silver carp, or Hypothalmichthys molitrix, is a proficient feeder that uses gill rakers fused into sponge-like porous plates," Ray read aloud, sounding like a schoolboy who had discovered a copy of Tropic of Cancer. "Of Asian origin, the silver carp was introduced to North America in the 1970s to control algae growth in aquaculture.' Didja hear that, Georgie? 'Introduced to control algae growth!'"

"Let me see that," George said. He continued with the article.

"Also known as the flying carp for its tendency to leap from the water when startled, the silver carp is considered a highly invasive species, growing to more than 3 feet in length and up to 60 pounds."

"Yahoo!" Ray hollered.

"I don't know, Ray," George said. "'Highly invasive species' sounds sort of ominous."

"Tut tut, old man. We're gonna take this to the next lake association meeting and those numbskulls are gonna sign off on this brilliant, all-natural solution to our lake problem."

It didn't quite work out that way. Apparently, the president of the lake association, a lawyer named Tony Waters, had already looked into the idea.

"DEP won't approve it," he declared. "It's an invasive species."

"So what?" Ray countered. "I'd welcome piranhas if they ate that green scum out there." He pointed out Tony's picture window toward the pea green lake. In the middle of the algae floated a pair of snow-white swans.

"Our lake feeds into a stream," Tony responded calmly, much as a very patient parent would to a child with attention deficit issues. "The stream feeds into a major river. Those carp'll swim right out of here and into the river and totally screw up the ecosystem. It's a disaster."

On the walk home from the meeting, an undeterred Ray devised his plan.

"I know some people," he said. "We can get some of these silver carp, no problem."

"But what about what Tony said?" George asked. "What about the stream? The river?"

"Think about it, man. Why would a silver carp—an animal that lives for algae—decide to leave this paradise for someplace else? That'd be like you and me leaving a neighborhood where margaritas grow on trees!"

"Even if that's true," George said, "the DEP will never authorize it."

"Screw the DEP! Don't you know the era of big government is over?"

"But, Ray—"

"I'll get back to you once I speak to my people," Ray said. "Meanwhile, I need a post-lake association meeting margarootie."

"I sing the body electric!" Ray exclaimed as he pulled off the Turnpike into the service area parking lot. "Hey, they have those Cinnabons here. Remind me to get one before we go."

He maneuvered through the heavy SUV traffic toward the rear of the lot. The Guy had told him to look for a rented van with Arkansas plates. He'd also said to bring along a large cooler, which sat in the back seat. Ray had borrowed it from a neighbor, Joey Keeler, who used it when bass fishing. It gave off a fishy smell that was not entirely eclipsed by the chemical odor from one of those scented cardboard pine trees dangling from the rearview mirror.

"That's the Guy," Ray said as they approached a U-Haul van parked next to a dumpster. He eased the Cutlass into the adjoining space and shut off the engine. In the van the Guy was eating a Nathan's hot dog with such concentration—try as he might, he could not quite prevent the relish from sliding out of the back end—that he hadn't noticed their arrival.

"Let's leave," George said.

"What?"

"Let's leave. Right now. Before it's too late."

"What're you talking about?"

"This is a ridiculous idea."

"Aw, that's Shelley talking, man."

"No. It's George. George says, 'Let's go.'"

Ray squinted and said, "Why're you talking in the third person, man?"

"We lose nothing," George continued. "No money spent, except for gas. I'll pay for that." Then George remembered that he'd already paid for the gas because Ray had forgotten his credit cards. "Let's just get out of here," he said.

"Excuse me."

It was too late now. The Guy had seen them. He was leaning out the van window and staring down at George.

"Would you be Ray?" he asked.

Ray leaned over toward the passenger window and said, "I'm Ray."
The Guy climbed out of the van. He was enormous. George pegged him at six foot

four or five, close to 300 pounds. But he did not appear fat at all. He was like one of those Russian weight lifters with their huge necks and barrel chests. He was mostly bald but what little hair remained hung in a limp ponytail over the collar of a salmon-colored golf shirt. His khaki trousers were pristine but for one green relish stain next to the zipper. He bent over and peered into the Cutlass.

"How are you, fellas?" he asked in a high voice without a trace of an accent. George could smell the hot dog nitrates on his breath.

"We're a-okay," Ray answered. "How are you?"

"Most excellent. Now let's take care of business so I can get back to civilization."

George looked over at Ray, who told him, "We're doing the right thing, man."

They got out of the car and followed the Guy to the rear of the van.

"Listen," the Guy said, "I know we agreed on eighteen each, but I had a little difficulty this trip and I'm going to have to charge a little more."

"What kind of difficulty?" George asked.

"How much more?" Ray asked at the same time.

The Guy looked from one to the other, unsure whom to answer first.

"The product was a little harder to find this time," he finally said, "due to certain regulatory issues, that's all. I'm going to have to ask for \$30 each."

"What sort of 'regulatory issues'?" George asked. "Is it illegal, what we're doing?"

"Don't mind my friend," Ray interrupted. "He's a tad paranoid. But thirty each—that's a 60% increase."

"That's the price, my friend," the Guy said. "Take it or leave it."

Ray got a look on his face that George had seen only once before, when he'd confronted a neighbor, Hilly Thomas, about his dog, Schnitzel, who liked to relieve himself in Ray's front yard. Hilly had refused to apologize or promise to curb Schnitzel, and Ray blew his top, making all kinds of threats against the dog. The two men still didn't speak, and Ray kept a pile of rocks near his door to throw at Schnitzel.

"How about twenty five?" Ray asked the Guy. The skin above his thick beard had turned bright pink.

"Like I said," the Guy replied. "Take it or leave it."

Ray was breathing heavily, as if his nose were congested.

"Excuse us a moment," he said, pulling George several feet away. "Goddamn shyster," he muttered.

"That's right," George said. "Let's get out of here."

"I've got exactly ninety bucks," Ray said. "We need sixty more."

"You mean you still want to go through with this?"

"We came all this way. We can't go home empty handed."

"But what's the Guy talking about—'regulatory issues'?" George glanced around the parking lot, as if the Department of Environmental Protection might be lurking nearby. "Could be the authorities are after him."

"Look," Ray said, "can you give me sixty bucks or not?"

"I already put in forty-five."

"I'll pay you back half. You know I'm good for it."

George pulled out his wallet. "I've only got \$27."

Ray reached over and yanked George's ATM card from his wallet. "There's a cash machine inside," he said. "I'd do it but you know I forgot my cards."

George looked over at the Guy leaning against the back of the van. He seemed a little perturbed. On one forearm was a dark blue tattoo of some kind of animal, probably a wolf or a mountain lion, George thought. Maybe he got it in prison.

"Come on, Georgie," Ray said. "Think of the lake."

George pictured the algae that covered the lake like a sickly green tarp. Just yesterday Shelley had gone on a rampage, probably hormonally inspired, about how disgusting it was, how they'd been ripped off, how the realtor should be strung up with piano wire. If these fish really do eat algae, George thought, maybe she would calm down a little.

"Okay," he said.

"Thattaboy," Ray enthused. "And bring me one of those Cinnebons, will ya? Hey," he called out to the Guy, "you want a Cinnebon?"

"Are we on, or what?" the Guy replied.

"We're on," Ray told him. "We're very on." Then, under his breath: "You shyster."

As George made his way toward the service plaza he turned back to see Ray and the Guy peering into the dark depths of the van. He thought of Shelley back home, probably up to her elbows in the garden, oblivious of this latest bit of insanity. She was a good woman, he reminded himself. She just took disappointments hard. The lake house was supposed to be their dream home after living in a cramped one bedroom apartment in the city for ten years. Fresh air, a yard, lots of trees—and a beautiful lake: that was the plan. Now, every morning when she opened the bedroom curtains, she emitted a disgusted sigh that landed on George's ear like a frying pan.

Inside the service plaza hundreds of travelers milled about or stood in line at Nathan's or Roy Rogers or Cinnebon. The ATM was located near the rest rooms. George inserted his card and requested \$60. For this privilege he was charged a fee of \$2.50. He decided he would ask Ray to pay the extra amount, as well as the price of the Cinnebon.

Next to the ATM was a payphone. He thought about calling Shelley and telling her what he was up to. She would probably yell at him and order him home, but maybe that's what he needed. Ray liked to intimate that George was spineless around his wife, but sometimes George thought Shelley actually gave him a spine, and without her he would be a jellyfish. If he called her now she might inspire him to stand up to Ray, and even to the Guy. He reached into his pocket for some change—how much would it cost, he wondered, to call from here?—but before he could fish it out the phone rang. He looked around, but no one appeared to be expecting a call. It occurred to him that it might be Shelley, but of course that was impossible. The phone kept ringing. He thought of some frazzled parent waiting to

hear from his child's kidnapper. He looked around again. Clearly, no one was going to answer this phone, so, finally, he picked up the receiver and said hello. Silence.

"Hello?" he repeated.

He heard a click, followed by the dial tone. He felt the person who'd been on the other end rapidly retreating from him, like a man falling from the roof of a tall building. Or maybe it was he who was falling. He hung up and went outside.

The Guy was just closing the rear doors when George reached the van. "Got the money?" he asked.

Before George could answer, Ray yanked him over to the car. "Check it out, man." In the back seat the cooler was open. Water nearly reached the top, the surface moving slightly. "Look inside," Ray told him.

George leaned in to see several silver fish, each about eight inches long, swimming around in the cooler.

"They're still young," Ray explained. "But they grow fast, especially when they eat a lot."

"Excuse me, fellas," the Guy interrupted. "Some folks in Pennsylvania are waiting on me."

"Here, gimme the dough," Ray said to George, holding out his hand. But George couldn't remember where he'd put the money. He checked his pockets, but found only coins, keys and a Kleenex.

"Where is it, man?" Ray asked.

George pulled out his wallet to find only the \$27 that had been there before.

"Time's a wastin'," the Guy said.

A flock of small black birds swarmed high above the parking lot, moving jaggedly but in perfect formation. George wondered if he'd dropped the cash, or maybe set it on the top of the payphone.

"What's the deal, man?" Ray asked.

George wanted to tell him about the phone call but the Guy had crossed his beefy arms in a way that spelled trouble, so he decided to save it for later. Then he realized that the three \$20 bills were balled up in his left hand, that they had been there all along.

"Cool," Ray said, grabbing the bills and flattening them on top of the other \$90. "Here ya go, my friend."

The Guy quickly counted the money and jammed it into his khakis. "Pleasure doing business with you fellas." He climbed into the van and revved the engine. "Good luck," he said as he backed out.

George and Ray stood watching the van pull away.

"Are you okay, man?" Ray asked.

"Fine."

The van roared out of the parking lot and onto the turnpike.

"Hey," Ray said, "where's my Cinnebon?."

"So did Ray get a new guitar?" Shelley asked when George entered the kitchen three hours later. She was snapping dry spaghetti in half and dropping them into a large pot of boiling water. She was still in her gardening clothes, her jeans dark at the knees. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, revealing aggressively gray hairs at her temple.

"Nope," George said breezily. He kissed her cheek and headed toward the living room to mix a drink at the wet bar. The wet bar was his favorite feature of the house and, according to Shelley, the main reason Ray liked to visit so often.

"You guys were gone an awfully long time to come home empty handed," Shelley said before he could escape.

He paused in the doorway. "You know how Ray is. He couldn't make up his mind."

"How can he afford a new guitar, anyway?" she asked. One of her obsessions was Ray's mysterious source of income. He had no job, had never mentioned any previous jobs, and had no apparent plans to find a job in the future, and yet he lived here in a lake front cottage that, even in its shabby condition, must have cost a few hundred thousand dollars.

George shrugged, as he always did, and left the kitchen, hoping that would be the end of Shelley's inquisition. It was imperative that he not antagonize her because later on he would have to make an excuse to go over to Ray's house. They'd planned to release the carp upon their return, but Joey Keeler had been out in his rowboat—he always maintained that the algae was good for fishing—and would have seen them.

"You want a drinky?" George called out to Shelley. Sometimes when she had a cocktail or two she fell asleep early.

"No, thanks," she called back.

He put together a stiff vodka tonic, took a sip, and sighed. All the way home he'd sat in the car listening to the water sloshing around in the cooler and imagining the fish inside, flopping and rolling with the disorienting motion of the vehicle. Meanwhile, Ray had gone on and on about how great it was going to be when the algae mysteriously disappeared from the lake.

"When that last scummy little bloom is gone," he'd piped, "I'm gonna march over to Tony Waters's house and tell him he can thank us for sending his property values sky high, man."

George hadn't said anything. In fact he hardly said a word all the way home. He kept thinking about that phone call and wondering who was on the other end. Obviously, he told himself, it was a wrong number, but still it haunted him. He'd heard stories of phone calls waking families up in the middle of the night when the house was on fire or the gas leaking, with no one on the other end of the line except, one had to assume, a ghost warning them to get out of the house before they died. But what was he being warned about? Was something terrible about to happen? Maybe an accident? He'd gripped the half-disintegrated armrest right up until the moment Ray pulled into his driveway.

"Come over after nightfall," Ray said when they'd spotted Joey out on the lake. "I'll be waiting for you."

Now, as he and Shelley sat eating supper in their dining room, George wondered how he would get himself out of the house.

"Notice anything different about the sauce?" Shelley asked. She had let down her hair, which helped to hide the gray at her temples.

George rolled a forkful of spaghetti against a slice of bread and took a bite. "Uh uh," he grunted.

"Nothing different about the meat?"

George poked at the ground beef in the sauce. He liked his spaghetti this way rather than with meatballs or plain. It was the way his mother had made it. "This isn't turkey, is it?" he asked. Shelley had once tried to fob off ground turkey as beef, but it hadn't fooled him.

"Nope," she said, smiling.

"What, then?"

"It's fake."

"What's fake?"

"The beef."

"Fake beef? Really?"

"It's soy. No meat."

George set down his fork and stared down at his plate.

"It's better for you," Shelley said. "And obviously you can't tell the difference, so..."

George took a breath. He hated this feeling of being bamboozled. Meanwhile, Shelley smiled that triumphant smile of hers and continued eating. "Mmmmm," she moaned as she chewed on some soy product. Lately she'd been trying to get him to lose some weight. She claimed it was for his health, but he figured she just didn't like the love handles that had ballooned at his waist. He didn't like it anymore than she did, but he was getting old, for God's sake, and lately food had become more important to him than looking good.

He rolled up another forkful of spaghetti and shoved it into his mouth. The sauce tasted different now, less savory, more plastic.

"Not bad," he said.

They continued eating in silence. George gazed out the window at the slowly fading light, the trees on the far side of the lake shading into black. The lake was a flat expanse of dark green algae. As night came on it more and more resembled a well-mowed field, perfect for baseball or soccer. He tried to picture it clean and clear, rippled by a summer breeze, silvery in the dying sunlight. Soon, he thought. Soon.

"So," Shelley said, her eyes still twinkling from her victory with the meat sauce, "you know what date it is?"

George thought a moment. It was the fifteenth, or maybe the sixteenth. What was so special about that? Their anniversary was last month, he knew that. And Shelley's birthday wasn't until November.

"Ge-o-rge," she said, her lips disappearing. "Does the word 'ovulation' mean anything to you?"

He had forgotten all about it. For months now, Shelley had been charting her cycle, religiously taking her temperature and calculating the optimal dates and even hours for conception.

"That's tonight?" he asked.

"Well, don't sound so disappointed."

"No, it's just that..."

"What?"

There was a split screen image in George's mind. On one side, the carp swimming in the cooler down at Ray's house; on the other, Shelley weeping the way she did whenever they argued about this topic.

"Nothing," he said, taking another bite of spaghetti.

Two hours later, George was having a little problem.

"Maybe you shouldn't have had that drink before dinner," Shelley said—somewhat judgmentally, George thought—after spending half an hour attempting to arouse him.

"Maybe," he said, and, satisfied that she'd made her point, Shelley returned to the task at hand.

George lay back on the bed with his hands behind his head, trying to relax. He shut his eyes and thought of Angelina Jolie, then of Tony Waters's voluptuous teenage daughter, Stacey, who he once saw in her underwear through her window. Ashamed, he moved on to brief memories of porno movies he'd seen years ago when he was single and lonely. But it was no good. Every time he detected a little progress, his thoughts drifted to those carp in the cooler and then to the mysterious phone call.

By now it was dark outside. Shelley had turned off the lights and lit a candle made with special oils or spices that supposedly encouraged conception, She'd said it was vanilla, or maybe nutmeg, but to George it smelled of rotten fruit. He bit his lip and concentrated. At this rate, he thought, he'd never get over to Ray's. Just as he glanced over at the glowing clock face—9:21—Shelley paused and looked up.

"Is there someplace you need to be?" she asked.

"What?"

"I saw you looking at the time."

"No! I mean, I was just curious."

"About what?"

"About how long it's taking."

Shelley groaned and lay down next to him. "Is there something we need to talk about?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe you've changed your mind about having a baby and..."

"No, that's not it." Which was true, technically speaking. George had never wanted a baby, but Shelley didn't know that.

"What, then?" she asked. She ran the tips of her fingers across his thighs, normally a surefire path to seduction.

The flame of the stinky candle wavered in the dark, making weird psychedelic patterns on the ceiling. George couldn't tell Shelley about the carp or the Guy or the phone call, so how could he explain what was distracting him?

"Is it too much pressure?" Shelley asked. "I know I can be intense sometimes."

"Maybe," George said, sensing a possible way out.

"Okay," she said, setting her hands in her own lap and staring at the ceiling. "Let's just lie here for a while and relax. No pressure."

This strategy, of course, had the opposite effect of increasing George's anxiety. He pictured Ray sitting out on his stone patio, probably getting high and playing Cat Stevens songs as he waited for George to show up. Then he had a brilliant idea.

"Maybe I need a walk," he said.

"Really?"

He could detect the anxiety in her voice. "Not a long walk," he reassured her.

"Cuz there's a very definite window of opportunity," she explained.

"I know."

"We can't miss it."

"I know. A short walk. Fifteen minutes, maybe."

She thought a moment, then sat up. "Okay. Fine. Let's go."

"No!" he exclaimed a little too loudly. "Just me, I mean."

Shelley didn't say anything, but in the quivery light of the stinky candle he could see her face.

"I think I just need to be by myself for a few minutes," he explained. He took her hand and added,

"Just to get my head on straight."

"So to speak," she said.

"So to speak." This is good, he thought. She was loosening up a little.

"And you'll just be fifteen minutes?" she asked.

"Tops."

George ran down the lake road in the pitch dark. He hadn't bothered to tie his sneaker laces and nearly tripped into one of the many potholes on the poorly paved road. Crickets chirped in the shrubs along the shore, but otherwise there was only the slap of his soles on the ground. As he neared Ray's house he could hear the light strum of a guitar.

"Where ya been, man?" Ray asked.

"Sorry."

"Everything okay at the homestead?"

"Fine, but we have to hurry."

"Want a margarootie?" Ray asked. "It's a killer batch."

"No, thanks." George glanced at his watch, then realized he hadn't put it back on. Shelley always insisted he remove his watch when they made love, even when it wasn't bedtime. She wanted him totally naked. "I have to get back ASAP," he said, "so..."

"Let's do it, man."

Because the Cutlass was a two-door car, they had some trouble getting the water-heavy cooler out of the cramped back seat. The passenger-side seat belt kept getting in the way, and there wasn't enough room for the two of them to get a decent grip. Finally, however, with George pushing from inside the car, they did manage to slide the cooler out and set it on the gravel driveway.

"Let's see how these babies are doing," Ray said as he opened the lid. In the dim light from the patio George could make out several silvery shapes in the water. As his eyes slowly adjusted he could see that something was wrong.

"Why aren't they moving?" he asked.

"They're moving," Ray answered.

"I don't think so."

Ray shook the cooler and said, "Yeah, they're moving."

"They're moving because you shook the water up."

"Aw, man," Ray groaned. "I'm gonna go get the flashlight."

George gazed down into the cooler. These fish are dead, he thought. Ray returned after a moment and switched on the flashlight. It was one of those huge spotlight-type things and the blinding light reflecting off the water made George shut his eyes for a moment.

"Aw, man," Ray said again.

The fish floated on their sides, their tiny blank eyes staring up at George and Ray.

"What happened?" George asked. "You think the Guy ripped us off?"

George could hear Ray's breathing getting louder. He backed away a foot or two while Ray continued to stare down at the dead fish.

"Take it easy, Ray," George said.

Ray groaned, then bent over to pick up the cooler. He grabbed the plastic handles and tugged, but it was too heavy. Cursing, he managed to lift the cooler an inch or so off the ground and, with a shout, he tipped it over. Water poured onto the driveway. The five fish landed with sad little slaps on the gravel.

Ray slammed the cooler back down and said, "I need a drink."

"Hold on," George said.

One of the fish appeared to be moving. It shivered on the gravel, then flopped over onto its other side.

"We have a live one!" Ray shouted. He picked up the baby carp in his hand and rushed across the road to the shore of the lake. George grabbed the flashlight and followed. At the water's edge Ray paused and held the agitated fish out in front of him. In the harsh glare of the flashlight he looked like some disheveled Biblical character making a sacrifice.

"Go to it, little man," he said to the carp, and then he tossed it into the lake.

George shone the light on the spot. The fish had landed on top a thick crust of algae.

"Damn!" Ray hissed as the fish flopped atop the green scum, unable to penetrate through to the water underneath. The two men stood and watched the poor creature struggle, calling out to it, encouraging the carp to break through. Soon they were jumping up and down, shouting, "C'mon! You can do it!" but the carp just laid there, gasping for water.

Just when it seemed the fish would give up and die, George gazed down into the little creature's staring eye, and something about it reminded him of the phone call. What had the person on the other end been trying to tell him?

For some reason he turned the glare of the flashlight on the ground.

"What're you doing?" Ray asked.

George scanned the area with the powerful beam. Near a tree lay a long branch that had fallen.

"That's it!" he hollered. He ran to the branch and picked it up.

"Georgie?" Ray muttered.

George held the branch out over the water. Just long enough, he told himself. With a quick movement he jabbed a hole in the thick algae near the carp.

"You're brilliant!" Ray shouted.

George then gently prodded the little fish toward the hole. Go on, he thought. You can do it.

The carp teetered on the edge of the hole. George gave it one more nudge with the stick and the fish looked up at him with what seemed to be an expression of thanks, his glassy little eye revealing a frightening flash of understanding. Then it fell into the water with a dull splash.

"Huzzah!" Ray cried.

George and Ray stood there looking into the water for several minutes, imagining the carp darting through the murky depths, already gobbling away at the delicious algae.

"You know," Ray said, "we're gonna have to get us some more of these fish."

"I know," George said, but he didn't want to think about it now. Instead, he thought of Shelley, whom he pictured pacing the bedroom in a huff. She still had a nice body, he had to admit, her legs slim and long, with just the tiniest layer of softness

around her middle. He felt a stir in his groin.

"I gotta get back," he said.

"Hey, we should celebrate first with a margarootie."

"Sorry, Ray," George said. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's cool," Ray told him. "We'll discuss the next phase of the plan."

"Good idea," Geoge said.

The two men shook hands. Then, anticipating what awaited him, George walked into the darkness toward home.

Chris Belden writes fiction, plays, screenplays and songs. His work has appeared in various small magazines (most recently in *Skidrow Penthouse*), on various small stages, as well as on late night cable TV and obscure college radio stations. For more details, please visit him at www.chrisbelden.com.

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