

The One Thing I'll Say about North Florida

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WE GOT DRUNK and went oystering. Went oystering, got drunk. Drank moonshine. Not everyone. I didn't get drunk. No one got *drunk*. But "We went oystering and got tore up" is how Zeke will tell it at the roast and how we need it told.

I don't know any of these people. My new landlord Zeke invited me. Tough dude with two teens and a ponytail, but he's afraid to charge us rent. He is kind to me, compulsively kind. It does not occur at first that he likes me. I am new to casual friendships with mature men. I mean, I have had mature men friends, friends upwards of fifty—seventy-seven, once—but there has always been the implied deference, the gentle implication that they are doing the world's work and I am not, that they are humoring me, that the complicated blotching of their skin and the ruminative pauses before they drop in a serviceable word are beyond my ken, which they are, because somehow, at thirty-two, grown men are still otherworldly to me. It's my wife Holly who encouraged me to accept the oystering invite.

It's four A.M. in our complex and Zeke is tapping our bedroom window with a Maglite. "Go on," Holly says with motherly sleep-rasp and, and then I'm out in the dark winter morning, milling in Zeke's driveway next door, toeing gravel with the others who've shown up in the February dark in jeeps and proper swamp boots, all of us loading up pails, cross-peen hammers, thermoses. There are six of us: Zeke; his sixteen-year-old, Joah; Robby the arborist from Jersey, rough and mouthy in a friendly working-class way; Robby's gofer, Eddie, a short burly burn-out who part-times as a forest ranger; the mild, pale-nosed husband of a woman whom Zeke's wife teaches

with, the only one even more out of his depth than I—Ryan, maybe?—and me, Zeke’s new tenant, “Colombo,” because I wait tables at a Spanish or Cuban chain restaurant, The Columbia, and am just catching on that life is a flop.

There is argument over who will ride with Zeke’s son in his electric-blue pickup, which is “dropped” (rear suspension ripped out) and toxic inside with spray-deodorant cologne. Hard to think what a boy thinks. It’s got snow tires on it, this truck, and we’re in Florida. Their appeal is evident, though.

Finally Robby and Eddie squeeze in with Joah. This Ryan dude, the school teacher’s husband, elects to drive alone because he has an appointment later, which when he reports this he is ridiculed in a way that sticks. I ride with Zeke.

“My son,” he says as we trail Joah’s low-dragging taillights out of our sandy cul-de-sac, “is becoming a redneck. I mean a real one.”

It is always something for me to ride in another man’s car very early in the morning, in the dark, so it’s just the dash lights, the close-space body movements, the smell of work things and of laundered work clothes and bad breath. It’s like sitting in the murky straight-drive heart of the world’s sober workings before dawn. Zeke and I might have been through a war together already.

I like how Zeke talks—a gentle parody of his own reedy Arkansas accent, *dub-HUH*, plucking the end of each sentences like it’s a banjo. It’s the humblest form of irony on earth and works well in serious situations and non-serious ones. This is what makes the line “My son is becoming a redneck” funny.

We hit the Matanzas for oysters. Maybe it was not the Matanzas. We caravanned to some maunder of marsh. Parked the trucks on a little spit of land Zeke’s buddy Randy used to own, land once occupied only by a mountain of oyster shells and a shack held up by paint alone where Zeke says they all used to drink and jam through plywood amps.

As Zeke’s funny Honda Element gutters down the long narrow drive, dry tendrils tugging at the mirrors and popping, Zeke recollects a three-day bachelor party poker match. “Back then it was all about who had the shittiest truck.” Rusted out and flatbedded was best. Zeke thought he had the shittiest truck until a guy pulls up with a mattress on the back. Truck is a word with two notes, a down-pluck at the end.

Randy sold the lot to his brother and now an enormous box of a house, faux hurricane shutters and all, sits there on over-tall stilts at a “ridiculous as

shit angle” across the property, mostly lawn now, a winding white carport that almost glows in the dusk, all of it Randy’s brother’s, dipshit bullied by his Georgia wife into ruining the entire authenticity of the place. “Ruined it,” Zeke says and honks when he sees Randy, standing under a live oak, dragging a canoe across the night-blue yard.

A spelunking light on his head, Randy walks over in a Carhart coat and longjohns and rubber boots, hand inside his crotch, scratching vigorously. “Can’t find the canoe,” he says, leaning in Zeke’s window.

“What about that one?” Zeke says.

“It ain’t got the beam. We’d sink it.”

They have this plan, this intricate thing they’ve done before: harvest the oysters at low tide, then, when the tide’s coming in, walk the canoe down the creek and load in the buckets, letting the tide carry the canoe back to the launch.

“Maybe that wee one’ll do it.”

Randy shrugs. “Have to.”

Randy is this north Florida Paul Bunyan, his face big and bloated with boyishness, thick blond hair grown out into a shaggy a nature-boy bob. His chest is grotesquely meaty, rubbery nipples visible through the Carhart. The hems of all his waffled longjohns are furred and ripped like he’s lived twenty years in a frat house. Randy is terrifically rank and happy, oaky-voiced, both shy and loud. Maybe it’s him in charge of this thing, not Zeke.

“Remember how shitty my truck was?” Zeke asks Randy as we unpack Zeke’s Element (Zeke has one foot in the New Age, is almost artisan). Zeke goes on about how he and Randy had been driving back from the beach one day and the side mirror just fell off. “Isn’t that right, Randy?”

“Yep.”

“Just—fell *off*.”

Randy nods, swatting in the headlights of the other two trucks where to park.

“We didn’t say anything. Nothing to say. You remember that, Randy?”

Randy nods.

I blink back and forth between them like a gosling. I haven’t been introduced.



The tide is out, sending up a fresh powerful briny rot. We set off in different directions through the misty marsh grass, which I didn't know you even walked on. We split into pairs. I follow Robby the big mouthy arborist whom I haven't been introduced to yet and who is now, apart from the group, unnervingly silent. He walks in front of me, silent as a poet, four pails clicking over his shoulder, the way pails click in the morning. The marsh is surprisingly firm under foot. I carry nothing but somebody's stiff old gloves and a thermos lid of coffee.

Out across the marsh, the others disappear behind the grass as they leap down into the oyster beds, their boots hitting the shells with the sound of cheap plateware stomped into mud—a flat suck-grind, with a dull porcelain chirp.

(Months after this, attempting to help Zeke install cabinets in some kind of river mansion to make up some back-rent, I knock a terracotta donkey full of geraniums off a porch railing: it makes the same sound hitting the lawn.)

We stop at a ledge over a wide creek bed—our own claim, curled out of view of the others. Oyster trees tower from the receded creek bed like Chinese ruins.

“Lunkers,” Robby says.

“All right!” I say, my gaze spinning across the marsh and out over the bluing Matanzas or not-Matanzas before I follow him down the bank.

We navigate to the beds by leaping onto smaller clots of oysters, but we sink up to our knees in the mud anyway. “Use your bucket,” he says. “Push down on it”—addressing my helplessness without judging it because it is expected, or expected of me.

At the center of the bed, Robby sets down his pails. He looks at them for a moment, then at me. “You see a hammer fall out back there?”

I shake my head.

Robby looks at me. Assessing.

“You didn't see a hammer fall out?”

Shake my head.

Robby clambers back to the bank and sets off back across the marsh grass,

disappearing from view. I sit down there in the cold mud and wait, watching the water under the gray morning dusk, wondering if there is anything in my life that I am in charge of.

The morning hours slow and sprawl wide with the light toil of hammering apart soft oyster trees until there is nothing left to hold. Kneeling, up to our thighs in cold plough. Sweat moistens my back. We leap from island to island of oyster cluster, jump right on top of them. They make wet bone sounds. We work our way up the creek, leaving overfull buckets along the way, heeled into the mud, until the three groups converge, clustering for a while, then split off in different combinations. Up the creek someone laughs and somebody else says, “I know. It’s funny when a dog learns to malinge.” Every minute or so we hear the suck of somebody pushing down on his bucket to draw his thighs up from the mud. Randy loses a boot.

Everybody talks—chuckling deep into fields of authority that bewilder me. Amiable jokes about the pretentious architect everyone knows; elliptical complaints about contracting, how the local slag guy’s been ripping everyone off for years. I have no idea what anybody is saying. What the fuck does *It’s funny when a dog learns to malinge* mean? Why does everyone understand this talk but me? Does this talk bespeak the subtle irony of relatively sane adults? Or does it bespeak the shoddiness with which relatively sane adults craft thought and word? Are adults not relatively sane? Are people generally with it? Or is it all shoddiness and shitty trucks, underneath? I’m too old to be asking these questions. *I’m* adult. I’ve got to a point where I assume people are older than I even when they aren’t—these wise rock singers, tan TV dudes in scrubs, twenty-two-year-old murder investigators with rosy cheeks—all of them deep in the mix of life when I’m not. I’m always sixteen, I can’t shake it.

But I stay loose. I fill my buckets. It is pretty fun.

The tide starts sneaking in and someone fetches the canoe, walking it all the way out to where Robby and I had started, close to the marsh’s mouth. There we begin dumping the overloaded pails into five aluminum tubs crammed in and on the canoe, which Randy and Robby walk alongside to steer and keep from rolling as the tide gently carries the canoe back inland, collecting full buckets all the way in.

Oystering, we sip some shine, some of us. Just a little. Really not until after oystering; while we're cleaning them, cleaning them in an old cement mixer—not until then do we really drink, and it isn't so much, not too too much, enough for a happy little heat-blast in my chest, a slow-expanding cotton ball of heat; enough that for half a minute, just as the nine-o'clock sun pitches open the public tent of day and something in us gives with giddy tiredness, we all feel like teenagers after prom night. Up until then it's been a quiet, thoughtful morning, the *quince* and crumble of shells under boots, sore backs. We got fourteen bushels among the six of us, plus two bushels of clams.

We all stand there on the lawn, under the out-of-town rich brother's Spanish moss, cleaning the oysters in an old concrete mixer. The mixer keeps shocking Randy and Robby the arborist. Robby likes me now, is almost deferential. He works the switch with a stick. I feed in the oysters. Two buckets per cycle. Lot of oysters. Damn lot of clams, too. We get into the clams on the spot. Pass around a flathead screwdriver and rusted spackling knife. The tools circulate constantly among the three men brave enough to use them on the clams, which require dangerous might. Slurping down salty water. Drinking shine. A group of us proclaim these clams better than the oysters. Then I realize this is the group with least character—Ryan, the school teacher's husband affiliated with Zeke's wife; Eddie, the short, grizzled stoner who works for Robby and sometimes as a park ranger; and me, Colombo. I am often susceptible to this group because I am slow to discern their cast. Randy, Zeke, and Robby are handling the equipment and leave the initiates to our proclamations.

One day I'm a child in summer, eyes sweet-stinging from the country club pool, and now I'm oystering with these princes of shitty trucks. The men are fast approaching fifty and I'm their peer. I'm thrown by this. Thrown and thrown—I'll always be like this. I can't get it off my face.

But Zeke slaps my back and says nothing. We got drunk and went oystering is how we tell it later at the roast.

We drink out of a jar. "This is the stuff here—North Carolina," Zeke says. "Guy who made this got popped. He was on CNN."

The decidedly weird forest ranger was the one who wandered off earlier to fill up two buckets of big round clams. Said he just felt around for them with his feet. "Easiest thing in the world." I tried, and it was the easiest thing in the

world. We were all surprised at how easy it turned out to be to find clams. You just took your boot off and walked in the middle of the ankle-deep creek and worked the balls of your feet into the sand until your sole met the ball of a clam. Their shells reminded me of the skinned-up aluminum of matchbox cars. That boy worked for Robby but was applying to be a forest ranger. I never saw him at the roast.

“North Carolina. Guy who made this got popped. He was on CNN.” Zeke is a repeater.

Randy produces a bottle of Hennessy as a semi-joke and passes it around. I don’t know these guys, but they don’t act like I don’t know them. We all act like we know each other. Meeting before dawn has caught us off guard. Maybe they all do know each other. Zeke brought donuts.

The mixer pops Randy again. “Mothafucking mixta shock my ass.”

“He be gettin shocked,” Robby says. They talk like this without any trace of a black accent, just saying the black words in their regular twangy drawls.

“*Light-cho* ass up.”

“*Light-cho* ass up.”

“Light it up.”

“Ain’t nothin but a thang.”

“We be jammin.”

I know this is fucked up but am convinced, listening to it here by the river in the morning, that this is sensible nonsense, that there is nothing wrong in it. But I have no compass here. I don’t have a deep enough social index of these men’s lives to gauge the irony. I laugh.

An hour later it’s just Zeke, me, and his son in the Element; the other dudes took Joah’s fishing-lure-blue Axe cologne truck back. Ryan Prius’d to his dentist’s appointment. No one talked bad about him after he left. We’ve pulled into the overcrowded farmer’s market parking field. Mid-morning has happened and the world is loose. The Element is caked inside with mud (Zeke bought the car primarily because you can hose it out), and while Zeke ventures toward the market stalls to pick up some things for the roast, Joah and I guard the flatbed trailer and its seven aluminum tubs of overspilling oysters—a tub, too, of clams. We each climb up on a pile and sit there shucking and slurping like cracker teamsters before all the ogling beach tourists.

I'm tired now. The day is bright and warm and suddenly too busy. I feel a nap coming on. A peeling-off of muddy clothes and drowsy dancing around our apartment in my underwear before showering and going down for an hour or two.

Zeke returns with coffee for us. I do not thank him. I thank him two days later, which is worse. For here in fellowship is a kind of happiness that always sours. For instance, later that night at Zeke's roast, under a canopy of string-lights hung from oak branches, I am at the crowded shucking table, where everyone parts for Randy to dump another smoking tray on the table—plywood on two blue barrels with holes cut over each barrel, privy-style—and I put shells in the wrong hole and it's Randy who says, "You can't read?," pointing with the tongs at his red and white sign: "NO SHELLS." The adjacent hole is backed by the sign "SHELLS." Here is the moment that I am found out—a bourgeois boob good-ole'-boying it up with the local element. The day could not pass without the limit of tolerance being assigned—I had felt it coming—and the other neighbors and tradesmen around the table (who fucking says "tradesmen"?) sense it all clearly enough and stand smiling in the aftershock of Randy's humiliating corrective, both alarmed and relieved by it, and when none can hold my stare too long, their allegiance is clear enough. With everyone watching and silent, I reach down into the garbage hole to fetch my hulls, feeling among corn husks, not sure if this will make things worse or if Randy will look at me like I've misunderstood the spirit of his corrective, but Randy does look at me when I do it and says nothing, which seems to affirm that I have in fact stooped to the thing warranted by my mistake, which, if not corrected, would have, like, spoiled the entire compost project for all of the trash, because these boys are serious about their systems, which in the adult world subtend any fun that may occur. They keep their wires tight.

It is not half a minute before some asshole starts in with the "wrong hole" jokes, which flare like wild fire around the party, making me a semi-celebrity for eight minutes. "It is unacceptable for him to *humiliate* you like that," Holly fumes, aware that I'm taking it and always will take it. Later I ingratiate myself to two Bauhaus-preened professors from the local private college, part of Zeke's artisan-outreach contingency, and they are impressed by my Latinate irony until one of them interrupts and asks, "Wait, are you Wrong Hole?" I could try to get on top of this joke by claiming it, much like I'm tempted to claim the name

Colombo, but that spoils the joke, which is a worse offense than occasioning it and ruins you for life. To claim the joke creases your character permanently. I learned this in tenth grade, shortly after transferring to a private school in Charlotte that we all dreamed would catapult me into corporate prowess and country clubs of my own. My old babysitter Clare was a senior at the school and had always lived down the street from me and was flat-out the school fox. I had just begun at the school as a freshman when she invited me to a seniors' party at her house (perhaps at the behest of her parents; her father golfed with mine), and I hoped she hadn't heard the sophomores and juniors calling me "scrub" in the halls. I spent the week before the party rehearsing the reluctant-prep mystique of Andrew McCarthy in *Less Than Zero*, buttoning and unbuttoning and half-buttoning my shirts, but as I stood that night on Clare's crowded back porch talking to the three hottest seniors in the school, a fried chicken thigh smacked me so hard in the nose that my face began to pour blood. This was doubtless the doings of some evil asshole across the porch, but now I was the event of the party: Clare swooped in around me and rushed me inside, and for a while we were alone there in the bathroom, Clare dabbing blood and grease off my face over the clamshell sink. But then there were the vitilic hands of Clare's beautiful mother, her silvery British voice brightening the bathroom, the first British voice I'd ever heard as a young, young child many years before, making me princely by its proximity alone (she'd been upstairs reading during the party). And when I emerged, all the seniors at the party clapped and were solicitous and generous and wanted to know all about me, and I was the last to leave that night, walking home alone down the fairway, like Andrew McCarthy.

At school the following Monday there were some chipper chin-raises at me. But then I began to capitalize on it all too aggressively, insinuating myself into these seniors' cliques at lunch (slow to sense their impatience) and muttering "Cheeh-kahn" in a long I guess Chinese accent whenever I found myself walking behind the gigantic Jew who'd flung the breast at me and was then all apology and friendliness for the remaining party and even for the first few days back at school but who finally, after about the third time I'd lurked up behind him with this voice, turned upon me in front of the whole little private school pseudo-café cafeteria and shouted, very reasonably, "Stop *saying* that!"

Those were the people I was thinking of this morning, sipping shine and

oystering with the boys. Even those remembered high school kids were still adults to me, adults I'd been deferring to for years even into my thirties. But now I was not deferring to them. I smacked my cross-peen into oyster trees, and I was the true grit. I was true grit all along, a dude among dudes. Keep your country clubs and positions at the firm, give me my shitty truck. I am ready to maneuver this lowcountry.

I was thinking that all day, that is, until I Wrong Holed and realized I was the gosling still. Not even a man of means, it turns out, and yet somehow I am a man, a man of no means, and it makes me shake with fear to watch my body turn to adult clay, to fall in with the other men of competence, or of competent incompetence, the functional drunks, the sober drunks, whom I still don't understand, who remain as cryptically natural as adults as ever. And whom do I tell this to? My wife? Mexicans in the kitchen? I could probably tell it to my mother in heaven, but I worry about that habit. Do you think Zeke talks to a momma in heaven? Do you think Randy does?

Probably. Probably they're broken to pieces. We must assume everybody in the world is held together by scotch tape. But they've built their own houses, bought their trucks, winterized their inboard/outboards, and say shit that fits, and will keep on saying it until cancer hits them or a truck. And I can't say a thing that fits, that does not separate me, not even this. Especially this. I stay after everyone leaves, even Holly, to help Zeke and Randy clean up in the dark and get on top of the day. But I'm hauling out a heavy wet garbage bag and a shell cuts through back of my knee (another Wrong Holer!), so Randy and Zeke have to walk me into the woodshop to look at the gash under a lamp, Zeke seriously fretting and dabbing with an oily rag, Randy laughing—"Colombo, what the *fuck*, man!"—and steering me away from a stack of unvarnished red oak cabinet panels I've already bled all over, and still I can't tell if it's charity or if they really like me.