



The Carp

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," Larry said as they drove to meet him. "But he's okay, I think."

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

No answer from Larry. 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 prearranged meeting with The Guy at the Walt Whitman service area.

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

Larry 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 Larry knew. Last year the two of them drove to somewhere in Canada—eight hours into thick woods—to buy pot from some of those very people. The pot was intended for George's Uncle Hank, who had pancreatic cancer. Larry said it was incredible stuff, hydroponic or something, and would keep poor Uncle Hank in a pleasant haze. Anyway, the people Larry knew turned out to be a family of inbred 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 Larry 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 all the way home George was so tense that when they finally arrived his entire body felt 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,” Larry said. “He’s got a lot of business up here.”

“Really?” George had a hard time believing that.

“You’d be surprised, man.”

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 eighteen dollars each, then introduce the fish—in violation of Department of Environmental Protection rules—into Lake Tawaba, which at the moment more resembled a treeless golf course than a body of water, due to the vast amount of algae that bloomed over the summer.

Everyone in the neighborhood complained endlessly about the algae and how it prevented them from swimming in the lake on hot summer 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 bought their home during the winter three years ago, unaware that, come summer, the algae would bloom and spread like a rash 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 muck, 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 Larry was staring at him. He would do that sometimes, even while driving seventy-five miles per hour on the turnpike.

“Don’t sweat it, man,” Larry said, a wide grin erupting in the middle of his graying beard. “You won’t get in any trouble, I promise.”

“Very funny.”

By “trouble,” George knew Larry meant Shelley, not the law. 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 some-

times three syllables, before launching into a harangue about how he should know better than to go along with Larry on one of his cockamamy schemes.

“Seriously,” Larry 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 be none 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 Larry. 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. And while she tolerated Larry and occasionally allowed him to come to the house for dinner, she refused to set foot in *his* place, which was, George had to admit, a pigsty. For a woman raised to believe that a \$1,000 vacuum cleaner is an absolute necessity, this was a serious matter.

“I’m not worried about Shelley,” George said. He’d told her he was going to a music store in New York with Larry, who was supposedly looking for a new guitar.

“Whatever you say, man.”

It was George’s participation in Larry’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, Larry 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 Larry’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, Larry occasionally produced a few cold bottles of beer and even some locally-grown marijuana—purchased from the Conlin 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 like an empty bucket toward the edge of the roof. Fortunately, he managed to grab hold of the rain gutter and was able to hang on until Larry moved the ladder over to his dangling legs. Still, Shelley made him

promise to say no next time Larry asked him to go along on one of his adventures. (Two years later, Larry still had not been able to figure out how to hook up the windmill to the generator.)

“There’s Route 73,” Larry noted as they chugged past a turnoff. “Almost there.” He reached over and turned up the radio. The Mamas and the Papas’ “Monday, Monday” blared from the one working speaker in the passenger side door. He sang along in a surprisingly sweet tenor.

George first met Larry 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 Larry’s ramshackle cottage on the lake road, they heard someone singing and strumming an acoustic guitar. There was Larry on his patio in a lawn chair playing a Cat Stevens song, 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 Larry 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 Larry 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 singing until late at night, while Shelley steamed inside. Inevitably, after any number of tequila shots, Larry 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,” Larry would say.

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

“*Hypophthalmichthys molitrix!*” he said.

“Excuse me?”

Larry waved a copy of the local alternative newspaper in George’s face. “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 *Hypophthalmichthys molitrix*, is a proficient feeder that uses gill rakers fused into sponge-like porous plates,’” Larry read aloud, sound-

ing 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, grabbing the newspaper. There was a murky photo of a man holding a gigantic fish in his arms. George 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 three feet in length and up to sixty pounds.”

“Yahoo!” Larry hollered.

“I don’t know, Larry,” 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 said. “It’s an invasive species.”

“So what?” Larry said. “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 said calmly, much as a patient parent would speak 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 Larry 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? 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, Larry—”

“I’ll get back to you once I speak to my people,” Larry said. “Meanwhile, I need a post-lake-association-meeting margarootie.”

“I sing the body electric!” Larry 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.”