

Fiction
11/13X28
Janson

2 = Along a Wider River

~~Along the Alapaha~~
~~On the Alapaha~~
~~The Bothered River~~

Now that he is ninety=some=odd years old and can no longer lumber down the banks of the Alapaha, he has to scooch low and back like ^{an} ~~a~~ brittle old turtle. Down the root ladder set in packed gray dirt to the dais of roots below $\frac{1}{m}$ under a broad tupelo and a cypress older than he is. Still, the cypress is sprouting tender green needles, and the tupelo struts out over the slow water. Cypress knees, like pagan idols, stand in the eddy along the edge, with gray-pied moccasins braided around some of them. ^A ~~The~~ buzz of crickets and locusts join with a hawk crying over the banks of inward-leaning birches. The felled heart cypress and pine along the unsunned banks match the fish-roe tint of Dump Sanders who, in his patched khaki, blends right in ~~while he fishes.~~

On the platform of roots he stands, cranking his backbone to straight position $\frac{1}{m}$ he will fish now $\frac{1}{m}$ then reaches for his cane pole ^{waiting} in the wattle of bamboos growing along the bank. The pole has caught many a jack, and more mudcats that he can count. He practically lives on fish, has raised a big family on fish caught out of this hole $\frac{1}{m}$ that ^f and the corn and peas and such he grew on halves, plus coons he

trapped in the muddy slews and hammocks of Swanoochee County. Unwinding the line of his pole, he listens for sounds that belong $\frac{1}{m}$ the river's rilling, a crow's sore-throated caw $\frac{1}{m}$ sorting them from sounds that don't belong $\frac{1}{m}$ the clank of wood on metal, which likely means somebody is fishing from a boat upriver.

He goes dead still, his shadow merging with the shadows of maple switches on the sun-spotted water. As he gazes upriver, his cataracted eyes pick up the blur of boat and man spiriting from the tea-tinted shallows toward the smoky drop-off of Dump's fishing hole. In a minute the boat will pass, and in another minute Dump will bait up with that worm he can't yet see on the nearby red-stemmed maple branch. In spring, you don't have to bring bait. A smart fisherman can find bait, a smart fisherman can also whittle cork from the driftwood. It helps when you are old and poor and on your own.

The boat trolls right into Dump's fishing space, not two feet from him but blocked from view by the wall-like tupelo. Its metal sides scrub against the curb of cypress roots, scaring off the fish. While the man fishes, Dump listens. Phoo! The pulled tab on a can of cola or beer. Sounds of swigging. A plastic tackle box snaps open and clacks shut. Then some cursing $\frac{1}{m}$ the bite of a hook maybe. Hugging the tree trunk, Dump sidles north along the bank of snaky roots, careful not to trip, careful not to pry his shadow from the shadow of the tupelo now falling across the bow of the boat.

The man's fishing line sings, snaps—"Sonofabitch!"

Dump draws back as if stung by a yellow jacket. He knows that voice ¹/_M that harpy, gruff boom ¹/_M a voice he hates. Boss Pender. Dump fears that the voice is all in his head, since he hears it so often, waking and sleeping. ^{Maybe he's} ~~he~~ might only ~~be~~ conjuring it from nothing now, he might be losing his mind.

H ~~(italics)~~ When you get done turning under that back field, ^{Pender used to say,} go on over to the old Watson place and fertilize that corn. Rain's on its way.

H But it's sundown now, Dump would say to himself, tipping the sweat-sopped brim of his hat and peering west/southwest toward the Gulf. No clouds scrolling up, just a butchered sun leaking blood onto the pineline. ^{of} ~~He~~ never said that to Pender, never talked back to any of the men he farmed for. ^{But} of course sundown was the whole point: keeping Dump on a job that would carry over into the night and stall him from returning home ¹/_n home being a small, green, dogtrot house that Dump could call his own only as long as he sharecropped for Pender ¹/_M or as long as Pender could do what he had in mind to do with certain other shared property.

Dump waits now till he hears the boat riscing along with the current, then peeps through the bole of the tupelo at Boss Pender's padded back and silver head gliding in and out of the broomed willow shadows downriver. Though Dump believes he'll have to wait another hour or so before his fish will come back, he tips to the maple tree, left of the tupelo, ~~and~~ plucks a couple of worms, and deposits them in the Prince Albert can in his shirt pocket. Then he perches on the bench of tree roots and waits.

Sunday^m worst day of the week for running into others fishing the Alapaha. Seems like Dump spends the better part of his days dodging them. They don't go to church, but Dump doesn't blame them. Church is here. God is here, on this sunny morning. A breeze ruffles the tree tops, then wrinkles the surface of the water like silk.

Suddenly Dump hears the boat come banging back-oar on metal, oar on metal^m and then it shows in the sun-blared strip of black water off the far bank. Too late for him to get up and hide. Riding high and heavy on the jacked-up seat, Pender clanks his paddle to the bottom of the boat, grunts himself forward, and feeds up a rope tied to the bow from the mangle of tackle boxes, rods, and brown paper sacks. Dump is so still, he's barely breathing. He can feel the pain festering in his joints, but his mind never strays. Shoulders tucked, knees crossed, shrunken, he watches his shadow on the burnished bower of roots, barely thicker than the cane pole in his hand.

Pender swivels left in the elevated seat and wraps the rope around a cypress knee, swivels right and picks up a rod, rears and casts. A glittery red and blue split-tail plastic worm ploops into the water almost at Dump's feet. Boss Pender is squinting into the sun now, face red as a ripe tupelo berry, his silver hair shining like sun on frost.

Dump has just about decided that Boss can't see him because of the sun in his eyes, or maybe because Dump blends so well into the background. Then Pender reels in and casts again, this time downstream of the tupelo, and shades his eyes with his hand, gazing right at Dump. "Hey," he hollers, "you wouldn't happen to know a man goes by the name of Dump Sanders, would you?"

Dump clears his throat, spits ^h_M he's been dying to spit for God knows how long. "Can't say as I do," he calls back.

"Well," says Pender, shifting and bracing one hand on his bloated waist, "I'm from the IRS. Been looking for a feller owes us some money." His great haunches spread on the boat seat, his gut settles on his lap.

Dump tee-hees into his hand.

Boss laughs. "How you, Dump?"

"Ain't no good," says Dump, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hardened hand, then crosses his wrists on his crossed thighs.

"Come by here a second ago, didn't see you," says Pender. No mention of fishing in what everybody knows is Dump's hole.

"I been right here," says Dump.

The tip of Pender's rod dips, then bends and creaks, as he starts to reel in, watching the water dash as his fish lunges and wallows, then sulls on ^{it}s side for Pender to winch it into the boat.

Old mudfish," says Pender. "You want him?"

"Can't say as I do," says Dump. When his wife was living she would make mudfish balls ^h_M Dump loved them ^h_M fried brown.

Pender lifts the fish by its bottom lip, yanks the hook free, and drops the fish flapping to the bottom of the boat. Poles and cans ringing and knocking. "Old mammy fish like that'll eat up your bass,"

he says. *He*

~~Boss~~ rifles through his tackle box until he finds his pocketknife, thumbnails a blade to open position, and ~~gets a good grip on the handle in his right fist. Then he~~ rams the blade into the flouncing fish's ^{Then he} rinses the knife in the water ^{and} and puts it back in

his tackle box. Hardly missing a beat, he picks up his rod, checks his glittery plastic worm, and casts it upriver ⁱ_m Dump's side. The line swings down into Dump's hole as if ~~the hook is~~ ^g pulled by a magnet.

"Been catching much this spring?" asks Pender.

"None to speak of."

Pender's rod bends, goes straight. Silence. Then, "Sears is got a li'l ole trolling motor I been looking at. I ain't much for all this paddling and it getting hot." He squints up at the sun, then at Dump posing in the shade as if he's been planted there.

"Course my knees in the shape they in," says Pender, "won't be many more trips for me. That old gout! Can't hardly put in and take out no more."

He reels in, changes lures ⁱ_m this time a yellow plastic worm with a green head and bead eyes ⁱ_m and swings it out, watching water rings form. He has cast midriver, halfway between him and Dump. "That oughta do it," he says, and leans back till the boat seat groans. "I had to put in up there at the bridge this time. My landing washed out last winter when the river come up."

Dump knows ^t_m and ^{he}_x suspects Pender knows he knows ^t_m that Pender no longer owns a boat landing, no longer owns even the land the landing was on.

Pender waits, reels in a bit. "Looks like this old river's getting wider, don't it?" He rests one hand on his tree-trunk thigh, staring up and down the river.

"Yessir, it do." Dump has been watching the river widen for many years ⁱ_m current skiving away the sandy banks and lashing at the tiers of trees till the treeline that used to stand midbank has stepped up to the edge to meet its doom, naked roots anchoring to the

riverbottom. He's been watching the river change, just as he's been watching Boss Pender change, from rich man to poor man. All that farm and timberland in the seventies, dwindling to nothing. Overtaxed, undervalued, lost.

Not that Dump could gloat over Pender and the others losing their inherited farms; without them and their land, Dump was out of work, out of house, out of money, ^{not} pride, since he couldn't lose what he never had. But it had almost been worth his losses to see Pender lose it all. Watching Pender grow fat and feeble and foolish after years of being so lean and mean and proud.

~~(static)~~ Hate like the devil, Dump, to have to leave you with next to nothing, ^{Pender used to say,} right here at the end of the year and Christmas coming. You with that big drove of younguns to buy Santy Claus for. But you know how it is, ^I got that fertilizer bill to pay. Seed bill and what-have-you. Looks like farming's going to nothing. Maybe next year. ^{12/10}

Pender's rod bends, his line sings, and he reels with the leisure of a satisfied fat man. A ten-pound bass shines silver beneath the umber surface, streaks left then right, flips from the churning water with its sleek body arched, then bellyflops toward the riverbottom. The line whips and the boat rocks, balancing itself like scales. Pender grins, laughs, whoops, holds his line tight and high, and trawls the big fish in. "I got you, boy!" he says and lifts the fish with its notched tail furling. He lowers it like a baby into the boat.

Both hands spread on his knees now, Pender presents his gleeful face to Dump. "Man, I'm burning up," he says. The fish writhes and drums on the boat floor, sounds vibrating across the bothered river. "Reckon I'll just mosey on in," says Pender, swiveling his seat and reaching for the rope wound around the cypress knee. Suddenly he yelps, jerks back and jumps up, clutching his right hand with his left. The boat pitches side to side with Pender now lunging and spraddling his legs, trying to steady it. Too late. One more pitch of the stern and water pours into the boat. Dump watches Pender tilt sidelong, hollering "Snake!" in that voice that counts in Swanoochee County, then gurgling as he goes under, ~~his~~ silver hair streaming over his red open face, ^{Then} he bobs among the scatter of tackle boxes and ice chest, ~~boards and~~ empty cola cans, and sinking paper sacks now releasing cellophane-wrapped Moonpies and saltine crackers. The bloody carcass of the mudfish, white belly up, adds its marbling to the river water. Darts from the freed bass point toward Dump's hole.

Dump, on his feet now but stiff and silent, watches as Pender dog paddles to the other bank, downriver from the snake-wrapped cypress knee, and drags himself up onto a toppled cypress, panting and gasping. He just hangs there over the water-polished cypress, half-in, half-out of the water. "Old moccasin got me," he yells, as if in explanation for looking the fool. "What you do 'bout that?" He ^{is} eyeballing ^{CS} his right hand like it's a fascinating rock.

"They say if you got ery knife," yells Dump, "cut it and suck the pysin."

Still clinging to the cypress with one arm, Pender digs into his right pocket, then gazes downstream at his tackle box floating past a sand bar.

"You got your knife on you?" he calls.

"Yessir," says Dump, and fishes his jackknife from his pants pocket. "Got one right here I'll loan you."

"How bout bringing it on over here."

"Can't swim a lick," says Dump. He can't or used to could but he's not going to.

"Don't know if I can make it over there," says Pender, wrenching round to look at the far bank. "I'm just about whipped."

Dump's heart starts pumping hard, as if the snake venom is pumping from Pender's bloodstream to his. "Want me to run up to the commissary for help?"

"I reckon," says Pender, resting his head on the cypress trunk.

"Hate to leave you like that."

"I hate for you to," says Pender and checks his hand now swollen and stiff as a tarry work glove.

"It's a good piece there and back," Dump calls, as if to keep talking is the best medicine. "You gone be awright?"

"I don't know," says Pender with his head still on the log.

"I'll be on back," says Dump and starts his slow progress up the bank, looking back now and then at Boss Pender.

"Man that old and fat ain't got no business," Dump says to himself, halfway up the bank.

"Hey, Dump," yells Pender, "I don't think you oughta go yet."

"How come's that?" Dump yells back.

"I don't want to die_λ by myself."

"What you say?"

No answer.

"You OK?" Dump is scooting down the bank again. He'll just have to try swimming, try to help.

"I ain't OK," says Pender. "Ain't OK at all. Think it's my heart."

Dump's foot slips from the rooty ledge, and he slides on his belly to the platform below. He grunts. On his knees, he crawls around till he can spot the bloated body through the warp of heat. "I done fell over here," he calls, "broke something."

No answer, no movement from the log, just water lights spiraling up the trees on the west bank.

"You ain't pulling my leg, are you?" Dump, who never saw the snake, can imagine Boss Pender and his fox_λ hunting buddies at the commissary teasing him later about rushing around trying to get help for Pender, who most likely is playing a prank on him. They do it all the time. Once, Dump's coon dog leaped off the tailgate of his pickup and hung himself by his leash, and Dump didn't find the dog, dragging behind the truck like a butchered hog, till he coasted in at the commissary for gas and saw them all on the porch laughing.

And then there was that other time: all of them gathered to josh and lie and laugh about Pender sending Dump out to work at night so Pender could be with Dump's oldest daughter, who by rights should have been ruined but instead went on to college_m paid her own way_m and became a school teacher. A good daughter. Dump can depend on her to bring him home-cooked food and take him to the doctor_m been twice in

his life^h and she even gives him Father's Day cards which he doesn't deserve because he never said, "Stop that, Pender; don't you mess with my daughter no more." He never said that^m not even to his wife, who likewise went along to the fields at night to open the fertilizer sacks and dump them into the hopper. Both of them knowing, but neither of them saying, just eyeing one another from where she stood by the truckload of fifty-pound sacks with Dump on the tractor, the chut-chut-chut of the engine scuttling across the emerald rows of marching corn and rising in marl and potash dust to the star-pricked sky. Dump's hand had been on the switch key, threatening to cut the sound so his wife could hear clear what he had to say, that she'd best be getting on to the house^h "Stay there where you belong, Woman, and see to the younguns." But he never said that either.

"You better say something," Dump calls to Pender, "for I'm long gone if you don't."

The slow water rills^o the hawk lifts over the river, crying.