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Sketcher

Written by Roland Watson-Grant

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SKETCHER

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PART ONE

There is a crack in everything.
— Leonard Cohen

One

Well to begin with, lemme tell you, my pops is the reason we grew up in that swamp. And when I say “swamp” I don’t mean that great, big, wonderful Atchafalaya Swamp in south-central Louisiana that everybody talks about. No sir. If you don’t know too much about New O’lins, grab a map and go east, almost past Lake Pontchartrain, and you might see the little piece of purgatory I’m talkin’ about. I can’t tell you any names, cos there are no real names to tell. It’s a kind of no man’s land, a clammy corridor, part of the muddy mess left behind by the Mississippi slidin’ out into the Gulf. So don’t blink or you’ll pass it.

There were no wilderness tours and jazz music and dancin’ and jumbalaya tastin’ and boat rides coming through where we used to live, cos many people didn’t expect *nobody* to be all the way out there. All you’d see out there was wheezin’ trees, ankle-deep in the swamp. Most days, nothin’ moved except for maybe a dragonfly testin’ the water with its toes, or a crow screechin’ up in the branches to make even midday look spooky. So the first thing people asked when we told them we lived on that sorry side of the swamp is: “Now, how in da hell did y’all get out *there*?” Sometimes we’d say nothin’, but other times we’d tell ’em that our pops had a vision.

Yessir, before we were born, ol’ Pops hit the bottle hard one Friday night in the city and passed out. Round about Tuesday, when he came back to his senses, he told Moms he had a vision that he was standin’ in a crowd, and all the people saw a desert, a barren land with brown dirt stretchin’ from their toes to the top of a mountain on the horizon. In the vision a voice told him he had to journey across the desert to that

mountain. So he turned to the crowd and asked for people to go with him, but he couldn't find anybody crazy enough to do that. Then when he spun back around and looked in front of him again, lo and behold, all he saw was butterflies and big blossoms of every kind, with purple and pink, buttercream and strawberry colours swirlin' on top of the greenest grass. He said that he started walkin' and all those flowers felt like silk and velvet under his feet, and everywhere he put his foot a million more blooms exploded in colours that God had not yet invented. And they all made a rainbow road out of the city, from his toes to the mountain top.

Well, my moms said those were all the colours of his lunch that he left in the sink that Friday night. So, yeah. That vision that was supposed to take us into paradise was our first step into growing up in limbo. Now look, I'm not exactly blamin' my pops, I'm just repeatin' the facts like I heard it since I was born, just so you can see where we're comin' from. Now, I heard some of the drama from Pa Campbell – that's our neighbour in the swamp, who'd been around since before that time that everybody loves to jaw about, the *Sixties*. I was born early Seventies, so I guess I can't fully appreciate all that excitement and why everybody in the city and the swamp said *the Sixties this, the Sixties that...* especially old man Pa Campbell when he didn't take his chill pills. He always got excited and said: "Skid!... I don't know why they called you that name, boy, but, Skid!..." – *Pause*. "Oooh, the Sixties."

And you better have two hours to sit and listen to him talkin'. It must have been the time o' their lives, the Sixties, what with all that music and bell-bottom tight pants and lots of free love and everything. But I bet they still had headaches and mosquitoes and taxes, so I don't know what all the fuss was about. Anyway, Moms didn't have much to say about all that. Matter of fact, every time you talked about how we came to live at the edge of the swamps of Louisiana, she just

got real quiet and stirred them okras a little harder with her lips folded under. And she sighed a lot or she sang a hymn until she calmed down.

See, the way I hear it, when she came to New O'lins, Moms wanted to move into one of those apartment complexes they built back in those days along Hayne Boulevard, "Lakeside Apartments" they called them. Those apartments were fancy and new and for people on the up and up. But my pops, he woke up one mornin' after the "vision" and had a better idea. He said with the oil boom there would be some major construction sweepin' through New O'lins. So he suggested that instead of wastin' money on a small apartment, especially with the first baby on the way, he and Moms should go get a piece of the wetlands much further east. He said he had some contacts, and the land would be dirt-cheap, and if they were lucky they'd prob'ly even find oil on it. But if not, they would just dig in their heels and wait, cos it was only a matter o' time before all that development got into the swamps. I hear my pops would mock-preach about that day, the day they would go to sleep in the swamps and wake up in a better part of town.

"Any day now, Valerie, any day now. Hah! We'll be moving, hah!... without a moving truck. Hah! We won't be movin' out from the swamps, hah! The swamp will be moving out from under us! Take a leap o' faith ba-bay, take a leap o' faith! Amen. Amen."

And Moms would tell him to settle down and stop mocking church, since he didn't go there. At least not to *her* church. Or maybe she just didn't believe in counting your eggs until they're hatched. But then again, maybe it was because Pops is white and he was mock-preachin' like them black Baptist preachers. And that mighta made Moms uncomfortable, I don't know. But look, my pops isn't prejudiced or nothin', so get over it. He married Moms and she's not white. She wasn't even born in America. But I'm the youngest, so my family

didn't discuss those details with me. Anyway, as Pa Campbell tells it, every evening you could hear Pops coming into the swamp from the train tracks excited and hollering at the top of his voice about how far the construction had come.

"Valerie, what did I tell ya! They're all the way up past the airport now!" – or "Valerie! They're building interchanges on Interstate 10 now. Hah! It's comin'! Any day now. Just a little longer ba-baay!"

Well, after a while Pops stopped talkin' so loud about the whole thing, and then he stopped comin' home with the day's progress report altogether. Pa Campbell says Pops prob'ly should not have gotten land so far east, cos by the time I was born in '73, the whole New O'lins development slowed down and then stopped dead in its tracks just before it got into the swamp. And then after that, when Moms would go into town in the mornings, she said the cranes and bulldozers and all those other construction machines just sat there by the side of the road lookin' all tired and refusin' to go any further. And in the evening, on her way back into the swamp, she would pass them again, and sometimes she was hopin' to see them suddenly start up and belch smoke into the air and dig at the earth and move stuff, but they'd still be sitting there all cold and lazy. Then, almost as soon as you passed them, civilization just kinda surrendered, and you'd find yourself "on a goddamn safari". The sounds of swamp life would drown out the city more and more, until you were so deep in the soggi-ness you wondered if the steel and stone city was only something you imagined up. Soon there was a crack on the map, an area nine-minutes-wide by car. A clear line that showed where the construction stopped and where the swamps began.

Pa Campbell said the city was "nearly near but fairly far" – and the almostness of it was heartbreakin'. At least for my pops. We crossed this distance into New O'lins every day using a lonesome ribbon of road with bayou on both sides. There was nothin' but mangroves and open water until you

hit the mainland and rolled under the very first overpass, the concrete feet of the city. This was the stretch between the swamps' desperate fingers and the toes of New O'lins. Toes that stood their ground. So by the arrival of the unexcitin' Eighties, there were four growin' children in the pass: Moms was sayin' we had moved to a "whole 'nother country, just slightly outside of a city", and Pops wasn't comin' home happy. Hell, some days he wasn't comin' home at all.

There was a long period when, every day after sunset, we'd take turns askin' Moms where Pops was. We always did it in order, from the eldest to the youngest, for some reason.

"Well," said Moms when Tony asked her where he was, "if the city didn't come to the man, the man will have to go to the city."

"Well, he's everywhere, but here," she told Doug.

"Well, I think he took the scenic route home, son," she told Frico.

Simple answers. I was only eight, but when my turn came to ask, she had to make it complicated. She said: "Skid, I'm so tired a y'all asking me where he is. Why don't you all get on that CB radio and holler out your dad's name and tell him to get himself home."

So we did. Now, we had a CB radio, and in the Eighties that was a big deal. You had to have a CB nickname and all that fancy stuff. And we called our dad "T-Rex" on the radio. And my pops, he was one of the biggest godfathers of Citizen Band radio technology in the South. People knew him, cos he fixed CB radios and boosted their frequencies, and he invented all these sky-scrapin' antennae things that could prob'ly pick up as far as China. So when we all got on the radio and switched to Channel 19 and started pressing the hell out of the key on the microphone and jumpin' up and chantin' "Breaker, Breaker, T-Rex, you copy? Come on home, T-Rex", all the truckers and all the cops and the hunters and the shrimp fishermen and people as far as frickin' California

and prob'ly Mexico could hear us. And man, they all started in on the joke, whether they knew T-Rex or not, cos that's one of the things that CB radio people do.

Well, within fifteen minutes we could hear the Ford Transit engine revvin' into the swamp and the tires grindin' and the door slammin', and the great big ol' T-Rex came crashin' into the house with his claws all out and his teeth sharp. He looked across the room and growled at me, cos he said my voice was the loudest on Channel 19. *Me?* And he made me get back on the CB radio and announce that "T-Rex made it home tonight", and then I had to speak like I was an AM radio announcer, with a big, dumb radio voice and everything. I had to tell 'em what time it was, and do the weather report and tell 'em to "stay tuned for more news". See, in my house they had to get creative with punishment. For example, you can't tell a kid "Go to your room" in a one-room shack. You have to tell a kid "Go to your bed". So when I thought that my radio-announcer bit was good enough, Pops said, "Umm, naw," and made me go back "on the air" and apologize to each state capital and Mexico City individually. And that's hard when you don't have a map and you can't speak Spanish and your brothers are all snickerin' in the background. Moms was sorry for me, even though she had this big ol' smile on her face when she was sleepin' that night on account of rufflin' Pops' feathers. Meanwhile I stayed up listening to two owls matin' on the tin roof while trying to remember which of the capitals I'd left out. "Raleigh, North Carolina!" is what I jumped up and said at about one in the mornin'. The crickets couldn't care less, but out of the darkness Pops said: "It's about time, Skid." I think that phrase had become part of him, cos he heard it so many times comin' out of Moms' mouth. My Moms is real patient, but it seems that as soon as she realized this vision of his wasn't happening, she just got real antsy, and on some days she was plumb fit to be tied, I tell ya. We could hear "It's about time we got out of this swamp"

fourteen times a week – seven if we went to bed early. And the poor guy would do his best and say just about anything to make her more comfy. But that's like fluffing someone's pillows when they're sleepin' in a graveyard, or buildin' somebody up like a big ol' dam. Cos one night, right after the sun noddod off, the Valerie Beaumont Dam broke and everything flowed into a big fight.

Two

See, how the cussin' started was we had this five-hundred-gallon water tank outside the house, and it was running low, almost empty, and that was slowing up work in the kitchen. Pops and Pa Campbell had been braggin' that they could use a mud pump and PVC pipe to dig a well until they hit groundwater. But they hadn't done much more than the braggin', cos those two can't stand each other long enough to get anything done. So when Pops made the mistake to ask Moms how far along his dinner was, she answered him the way Doug says women do when they've been stewin' about somethin' for a while.

"They got running water on Hayne Boulevard, Alrick."

At this point Pops could still have escaped by just playin' deaf.

"Huh... what?"

"I *said*, they got running water on Hayne Boulevard."

Once she repeated herself, it was too late. The poor guy dug into a radio he was fixin'. Couldn't even look around to face her.

"Oh... I see. Well... um, we got running water too, baby! And as soon as Pa Campbell helps me dig down to that groundwater, we won't have to be hauling water any more."

"They say you could drink the water straight from the tap on Hayne Boulevard, Alrick."

"OK, but I'm fixin' to dig a thirty-foot well with a distillation unit that's going to be the best damn distillation and desalination unit in the swamps, Valerie."

"You mean this year? This year, Nineteen Eighty-one? You got so many intentions and ambitions, this world is just too

small for you and the clock is short on time, Alrick Beaumont.”

“Well, what else do you want, Valerie? I know this ain’t your Hayne Boulevard, but we doing the best we can – look!”

And that’s when he pushed back his chair and got up, and Tony started doing a quiet drum-roll sound effect with his mouth, cos he knew it was time once again for the *Grand Tour of our One-Room Swamp Shack*. My old man stood in the middle of the room and turned around three-sixty degrees, pointing with his left hand at things you really couldn’t see, cos they were prob’ly outside in the mud or hidin’ behind the mountains of stuff he was repairin’.

“Val. Look. We got a 45-kW generator with a Caterpillar D90 engine – brand-new – plus four eighteen-wheeler batteries for back-up. We got two four-by-two-foot KeroGas stoves for cookin’ and bakin’, a forty-channel Cobra CB radio – that’s the latest, with more output than they allow in these parts. It’s peaked and tuned and it’s got a thirty-foot antenna outside, so you can talk to whoever you want. We got two HF-1200 walkie-talkies jus’ in case someone needs to go into the woods. For godssake, we got the city right next door, Val!”

She just kept choppin’ carrots without lookin’ up. Instead she answered real soft, like the Wisdom Book of Proverbs say you should:

“You’re right Alrick: we got everything we need *right* here. Everything... *except* running water and rice. That’s right. Between makin’ sure we all got home when you’re out doin’ your ‘evening activities’ and me trying to keep my two jobs cookin’ and waitin’ tables for other people, your wife forgot that we’re out of rice. So, Alrick – look: we got five ounces o’ lean ground beef, one large onion diced, ten ounces of sun-ripe tomatoes, green chilli chopped and one pound o’ red beans, but we need about six or seven ounces of Zata-rain’s right about now. And where we going get it, Alrick?

And don't say 'Lam Lee Hahn'. Those Chinese people know exactly how to shut down shop and head home at night. They know that nobody 'cept the Beaumonts would be coming to make groceries this time o' night. Those Asian people, they opened a shop out here in this hellhole... but they're smart. They live in the city. In the *city*. So, you goin' get it, Alrick? Just pop into the city and get us some rice somewhere... since it's 'right next door'."

I wanted to point out to Moms that the Lam Lee Hahn family – who were genius to set up that small grocery shop out near the train tracks to serve swamp folks and make money – were actually Vietnamese. But this cussin' was goin' good, and I wanted to hear the endin'. Well, to be honest the endin' was disappointing at first. It was just Pops sayin' the usual "*bordel*" under his breath and me saying to myself, "You know, Skid, cuss words might be the only French your Cajunish father knows" – even though he liked tellin' us all about The Great Expulsion from French Canada back in Seventeen Fifty-something, as if he had been there.

Now from where I was, I could see Frico in the old dresser mirror, in his usual place on the floor beside the bed. That's where he liked to sit and do his sketches – where we couldn't see him. Moms told us to always look out for Frico. She said to make sure he had his glasses on when he was sketchin', and then pay close attention to him, cos sometimes that boy would be concentratin' so hard on what he was paintin' or drawin' – he'd forget to breathe. He'd just kind of fall asleep sittin' straight up with his eyes wide open. Yep, he'd blank out and wouldn't budge for hours. So we'd shake him – and if that didn't work, we'd prob'ly have to slap him. They wouldn't make me slap him, cos sometimes I didn't know my own strength.

Anyway, there he was: I'm watchin' him in the mirror and – would you believe it? – all of a sudden he just jumped up with the sketch pad and walked out of the house into the pitch

black of night. Now that may sound simple, but you don't just walk out of Valerie Beaumont's house in the pitch black of night without someone accompanying you or making sure there are no black bears or water moccasins or demons lurkin' about the swamp. Furthermore, Frico was only nine years old. How dare you walk your nine-year-old self out of the house and let the screen door slam behind you like you can't stand all that fightin' in your ear? And especially *without* your glasses? But see, that's the kind of crap that Frico Beaumont got away with.

Now, I'm not sayin' I'm innocent. I'm jus' sayin' I couldn't catch a break, like with that CB incident – but Frico, everybody treated him like he was some kind of special, even though Skid Beaumont is the last Beaumont – the *baby* Beaumont. While me and Doug and Tony wash dishes and haul water and go borrow somethin' from that crabby ol' lady Ma Campbell across the fence, Frico gets to take Calvin, our yaller dog, on a lovely stroll to the shop or to go paint by the train tracks or deeper in the swamp. But even then, that's during the day. So when he stormed out of the house that night, I was waitin' to see if he was finally gonna get it. But Pops, he just stopped his Cajuncussin' and said: "Y'all go on and get your little brother."

Of course, even if Doug and Tony weren't doin' no homework, they weren't gonna get up first, cos they were just tired of goin' after Frico. So I jumped up like a good boy, made sure the screen door didn't slam when I ran out and waited to see if anybody was goin' to come after li'l ol' Skid and protect him from black bears, water moccasins and demons. But no, sir: 't was just me, myself and a million crickets.

Now, even though I don't personally believe it, older folks say that strange things from hell walk under the old cypress trees after dark. So, if you ever go walkin' in the swamps, here's a few rules for ya, just like I heard 'em.

If you see a shadow walkin' out on the water, look away.

If you hear someone whistlin' or singin', don't join in.

If a voice calls your name in the woods, walk in the opposite direction. Quickly.

Watch out for a hairy man with his head in the trees: that's the Loogaroo werewolf man.

Look out for the little bald-headed girl walkin' fast – and don't follow her.

And most of all, you need to look out for James "Couyon" Jackson and his gang, who'd dope up on crack before coming in a black van to cut out your kidneys and leave you in a tub full of party ice and rock salt. The way I heard it, you'd rather bump into the Loogaroo man after dark than run into those crack-pipe-hittin' types in the broad daylight, I tell ya.

So yeah, Pops told me all these stories and then he let me go out alone. Anyway, all that waitin' in vain on the doorstep made me lose precious seconds, so by the time I chased after Frico he had disappeared, almost like the darkness was a stretch of water and he'd done gone under in it. Well, after walkin' blind for a while, I realized I didn't know where I was. See, in the pass, we lived on a little piece of land, shaped more or less like an "L" – a cul-de-sac, really. The top part of the L was connected to the mainland and led in from the train tracks that ran through the swamp. You went down a grassy slope from the tracks when you entered the L. Then, a little way in, there was a footbridge with a decent enough creek runnin' under it. You crossed that bridge and went on for about two hundred metres on a dumped-up marl road before going round a bend into the bottom part of the L, which is where we lived along with Ma and Pa Campbell. Their house was right across the chicken-wire fence from us.

Now, all around that L-island, as I call it, there was some murky swamp water filled with alligators and lots of drown-ing opportunities. So at night, without a light or a full moon, you could easily end up going off the corner of the L – and that would be the end of it. Furthermore, after the dry season, when rain broke a drought, big ol' sinkholes could be

anywhere. So I stayed put until I saw Tony and Doug way behind me with a flashlight and I got a sense of where I was.

Doug was callin' out, "Skid, wait!" – so I walked in the opposite direction. Tony, who was the eldest at thirteen, began yellin' something scary about some vampire guy that he used to watch when my family had a TV. I wasn't goin' to look like no baby, so I took my bearings from the light and just kept walkin' until I saw the flashlight bobbin' up and down, on the ground and up in the cypress trees, so I knew they'd started runnin' after me. I took off at top speed and just kept lookin' behind me from time to time.

Now, I don't know how soon it was, but I just felt the ground getting soggy and soggy, and then I heard a voice from heaven say: "Skid, stop." Actually it was Frico's voice – but that was good enough. He sounded like he was up above me in a tree somewhere – and that was weird, but that's ol' Fricozoid for ya. Then, when I stopped and peeled my eyes and looked dead ahead into the night, there – right in front of me – was a steep slope straight into the dark swamp water.

"Don't move."

Hell, like I needed him to tell me that. I started reversing slowly, and he said again from up in the tree: "I said don't move – till I tell ya."

That's when I saw the eyes. Just above the water surface, right in front of me. One massive bull alligator, about a twelve-footer, right behind the grass, just waitin' for me to keep walkin' forward. Even though I'd just finished runnin', I felt colder than a dead eel and I started wondering where the hell was Doug and Tony when you need 'em? When they finally caught up, Tony was pantin', cos he was kinda pudgy. In the dark I could still see that Doug had a "what the hell is wrong witchoo" look on his face. He had dragged on his soccer uniform back to front and he had only half-pulled out his cornrows when all the chasin' started. He shone the light on the bank in front of me and said: "Look, fool."

I saw that I was standing in an alligator slide – that’s the long slide marks that an alligator’s belly makes in the mud when he’s gettin’ off the river banks to prob’ly get dinner. And that gator just sat there down in the water like a flesh-and-blood submarine and gave everybody the evil eye. Then Calvin came up and started yapperin’ just to impress us, and the alligator raised his head and hissed just to let us know he wasn’t off-duty. So I walked backwards slowly and Doug started givin’ me a lecture, while Tony took the light and swept the area. He shone the light into that monster’s mouth and saw those teeth and started with the vampire stuff again until Doug, who was a year younger than him, told him to grow up or shut up, whichever one came first. So just to annoy him, Tony put on his nerd voice and looked at the sky, pointin’ out that US satellites look different from stars and they can move them around from secret locations on earth – and Daddy knew, cos he helped build a rocket at the NASA Assembly Facility over in Michoud and blah blah blah.

In the middle of all that science fiction and Doug lecturin’ and Calvin overdoin’ the barkin’ thing, here comes Frico’s voice again from up in the tree, real slow and soft in the darkness: “See, this is exactly why I got out here in the first place. Can’t catch a break from y’all. Jeez.”

And Tony swung the flashlight into the trees and Frico shielded his eyes and nearly fell off a branch. The guy had climbed into a tree with some branches that hung out over the water. Moms said it was a tamarind tree. It was tall, but still smaller than those big old cypresses and beech and willow trees. It had low branches, so it was much easier to climb. We always went up into that tree durin’ the day, cos it was like our lookout point. From up there, we could see clear across the train tracks over to that scrap-metal junkyard where those mean Benet boys live, north of us. Beyond their dungeon was an old clogged-up canal that could give them access to the far-east end of Lake Pontchartrain. Lookin’ east, all you

could see was train tracks. You couldn't see the end of the tracks, but we knew that one train went to Slidell – which when you're in the swamp is another city a whole world away. Turnin' around to the south-east, we could see the stretch of bayou in front of our house that, like I said, was built on the bottom part of the L shape I told you about. Along the underside of the L, you'd see Pa's sugar-cane strip, the mud levees we built, then some lonely crawfish traps bobbin' up and down in between the mangroves of the open pass. Beyond that there was nothin' but a lake and the eternal Gulf of Mexico way out south. Moms always said we came to live in the drainpipes of America. To the west was the best part, cos on a clear day you could see New O'lins with all those glass buildings lookin' liquid behind the shimmer.

Frico went "Shhh!" when Tony started climbing the tamarind tree and shakin' it. He made us stop halfway and promise we'd shut the hell up while he was drawing. It took effort, especially at night, but I climbed all the way up to the top where Frico was and told Tony to pass the flashlight, even though Frico had a cigarette lighter up there and everything. Frico had his back against the main part of the tree, and his legs were wrapped around a branch beneath him. Clutchin' a No. 6 pencil in his right hand, he stuck it into his shaggy hair. His left hand gripped a small sketch pad that was also restin' on his knee. I shone the light off to the side of the sketch pad, so that only the outer circle of the beam caught the drawin'. Frico was lookin' across the stretch of water towards our house. He was tryin' to sketch the swamp night scene, though he could barely make it out, cos he left his glasses plus the half-moon was just draggin' herself in over the Gulf. Then, when I turned around and looked west, my breath got stuck in my neck, cos for the first time, from up in that tree, I saw the city from the swamp at night. Downtown New O'lins was blazing and throbbin' – and when you moved your head, you could see all kinds of colours twinklin' through the trees. The

high-rises, with all those fluorescent lights inside their windows, reached up like a crown covered in diamonds. Then again, around the base of the buildings, the gold glow of the street lights over in tourist town made the whole city look as if it was hoverin' on jet boosters – like something that just came down from above. But man, if there was someone out there in the city lookin' back at us from a window in one of those fancy buildings, all they'd see is pitch black.

Frico had finished the outline of our swamp shack peeking out from the cypresses, so he started filling in the night sky. The soft scratch-scratch of pencil on paper and a sudden light breeze from the east lifted the heat from the swamp floor and made me sleepy in no time. I sat in the fork of two branches, rested my head back, closed my eyes and thought of Pops' vision. I saw the buildings of New O'lins comin' closer and closer. I could hear them: a soft rush at first, like faraway rain. Then the rush became a rustle that broke into a rattle of glass against steel and steel against stone. Faster and faster, buildings popped up from the swamp floor until they all came crashin' through the trees in front of us. Fragile blue cranes and woodpeckers flew away, and suddenly we were so close that we could lean across and touch the cool walls that swooped into the sky. We could peep inside offices and leave oily forehead-prints on the windows.

Then the light breeze stopped, and a mosquito started blowin' a jazz horn in my ears. It was off key, so I opened my eyes and killed it and wiped my palms on the tree. And my dream-city dried up and went away as well.

"Shhh!"

Frico didn't appreciate the noise, but something had distracted him before I did.

Lower down on the branches, Tony and Doug were pointin' to a light out on the bayou. Someone was prob'ly night-fishin' for bluegill near to our house. Pa Campbell wouldn't like that, cos whoever it was, they weren't from our little L of

land. The boat with the light came across the water until it was right next to the bank and up under our tree. Then, all of a sudden, a big ol' rock came flyin' through the leaves of the tamarind tree. We hollered out and hung on for our lives. There was laughter from the darkness below and then a metallic sound came clangin' up through the branches. I swung the flashlight to see a grapplin' hook barely miss Frico's face. I ducked down, and the hook wrapped clockwise around a thick branch right behind my head. Someone started pulling on the rope and whoopin' and yellin', tryin' to shake us out the damn tree.

"Let catch ourselves some Beaumonts, Squash!"

It was the Benet boys, who called themselves "Broadway" and "Squash", our regular bayou teenage terrorists. They weren't much older than Tony, but they were tall and stout like footballers. Each one looked like half a house, and I heard they even had beards before they were eleven. *Freeze frame.*

Now see, these Benet boys were vicious. They'd do just about anything to make life in the swamp a little more miserable for everybody. They'd been expelled from too many schools to count. They hunted in and out of season, killin' things just because they could. Their father owned a junkyard, and they just set down all day and welded together new devices to do the worst damage possible. One torture tool was called the "eye-catcher". That was a catapult made from tin and tire tubes. It shot nuts and bolts and could take an eye out. And don't bother tellin' their old man, cos he was worse than them.

Now it seemed the Benets were testing out a new weapon and they wanted us to be the guinea pigs, but we knew the drill when these demons came around. Holler and run. Doug was racing down the branches and Calvin was raisin' hell when my pops came out of nowhere and stood under the tree.

"Stay where y'all are!" he shouted.

Then he took out his knife and, while the hook was still attached to the tamarind tree, he reached up, leant over the water and grabbed the rope stretchin' out toward the boat. He cut the rope and let it fall back into the bayou. Two voices cursed out of the dark, then everything was still again. Pops called up:

"Come on down boys, and let's go – seems like those Benet boys need a good whoopin'. I'll go across the tracks and talk to their ol' man in the mornin'. Right now I need to go get the rest of *my* whoopin' from your mother."

Say what you want about my pops, but nobody was goin' to mess with us and get away with it, even though that time he let those Benet boys off easy.

So we're walking back to our house and the Benet boys are behind us on the bank, wet like swamp rats and swearin' about what they were going to do us next – but they kept their distance. Then Pops – I watched him, that man – he took Frico and put him in front of himself as if to shield him from any other Benet missile. Then it got worse. Pops took off his jacket and wrapped Frico up and took all his pencils and stuff and carried them for him.

Now, when I looked at Doug and Tony, they didn't see nothing strange about all that mollycoddlin' and that special treatment. I mean, I know Frico's kinda feeble and he was born premature and all, but he's the one who jumped out into the night air. Now, in Pops' fancy suede jacket, Frico was a warm, fuzzy bear and I was feelin' like the slimy serpent.

When we got back to the house, Pops told us to go on inside, and he'd be right in. I thought he was goin' to visit old man Pa Campbell (even though they weren't on good speak-in' terms ever), to tell him about the Benet boys hurling hooks and stones from their boat at us. But when I peeped outside through a crack between the boards that made up our swamp cabin, I saw him take something from his pocket. He looked this way and that way and stooped in the dark and dug at

the dirt with his bare hands. Not like I didn't see him do this before, but he always told me, "Skid you ain't see nuthin' now, y'hear?" So I asked Moms what he was doin' there in the dirt this time of night.

"Planting his dreams, son. Just remind him to leave his work shoes on the porch."

And she used the sarcastic voice only cos she just had a fight with him. I mean, you could see she loved the guy. She just hated the swamp life, and that fight with Pops was like the beginnin' of sorrows. And that's when it hit me – like a hickory nut in a hurricane: the one stone I could use to kill two birds. I got to thinkin' that the way to get things back in shape in my family and make them have some respect for people other than Frico Beaumont, was for me to get the city that had been sleeping for years, to start movin' into the swamps again.

So how was I plannin' to get that done? I wasn't sure yet, but right round that time when things were looking pretty bad, I just kept thinking how everybody in my family was proud of Frico's skills on paper. Moms thought his paintings and drawings were somethin' special, and Pops said Frico's gifts were going to "put the Beaumonts on the map once and for all". Frico had won school competitions since kindergarten, and they even put a painting of his on greetin' cards for sick kids over at Charity Hospital in the city one Christmas. Doug and Tony liked takin' him places to impress girls. So if anything was really goin' to help us out, it may very well be this boy's talent.

But lemme tell ya – for me, it was much more than just talent. I knew things that the rest of my family had no idea about. See, when I was really young I used to follow Frico everywhere, cos that's what little toddler-brothers do. And when I thought about it hard enough, I could remember that when I was about three years old, out by the train tracks, I saw Frico sketch on paper with his left hand... and he made some strange things happen. It had been a while, but deep

SKETCHER

down I *knew* what I saw. That boy was more than artistic. He had somethin' in his left hand... a strange power to *fix* things with a pencil. But just like the lazy machines on the New O'lins development, he had quit that kind of sketchin' and he wasn't budgin'. So my job was to figure out how to get him to do this thing again, in time.