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opening extract from

The Survival Game

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SUCKERS RUN

ONE day Burl Crow followed his father to a place on the river where the old man liked to fish. The spot was a secret. Burl hung way back.

Cal was whistling to himself. It was spring. Along the red dirt road there was new velvet on the sumac, new lace on the wild carrot, and here and there hairy stalks of liverwort poked through last year's dead leaves. Spring looked like it was dressing up to go somewhere.

It was odd for Burl to hear his father whistle. Cal was

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quiet most often, a sullen kind of quiet like thunder a long way off. Then all of a sudden he could Texas two-step himself into a rage and send things hurtling across the room: a plate of mashed potatoes, a broken shoe, a chair with you in it – whatever came to hand. You had to hold onto your seat when Cal was like that.

The whistling led Burl to believe his father was not in one of those thunderhead moods. It gave him the nerve to go on.

It was a foolish game, trailing a man like Cal. But Burl still recalled a time when his father took him places, showed him things. Those times might be lost, but Burl imagined with all the foolishness of a first-class dreamer that when something was lost, you just had to keep hunting for it.

Cal had teased him about the secret spot often enough. “It’s a man-sized hole,” he said. “You’d get lost – hook, line and sinker – in a fishin’ hole like that.”

He had taken to rubbing Burl’s nose in things. “Whose limp minnow is this anyway, Dolly?” Burl’s mother, Doloris, knew better than to answer.

The secret place was way downstream on the Skat, deep in the bush, at a bend in the river. The water was fast there, shallow but pock-marked with good cold sinks hard by the bank under trailing willow branches. In those green shadows a brook trout could laze around growing awfully big.

From the clumped and crooked cover of the alder scrub above the clearing, Burl could see that the river was swollen with suckers. The suckers were running up the rapids to spawn. You could have shovelled them out. But Cal had only his rod, and he didn't seem in any hurry to use it. He leaned it up against a beached driftwood log. Crouching on the gravel flats right at the water-licked edge, he lit up a cigarette.

The sun glinted off the water, off the backs of the swarming black fish. A bit of a breeze came along to finger through the bulrushes, as if it was looking for something. Just looking, like Doloris fingering through blouses she couldn't afford at the Woolworth's down in Presqueville.

The breeze ruffled Cal's thick head of hair, but it never found its way up to Burl in his uneasy hiding place. The blackflies did. They liked the sweaty company of Burl's face. He swiped at them, his hands whirling in a frantic sign language to which the pesky flies paid no attention.

The flies didn't much bother Cal out by the water. He'd swat his big ropey neck the odd time. Cal's hand was fleshy and fast. Burl had felt the back of it enough, the palm of it, too. The knuckles were new to him. It was as if Cal had been saving the knuckles as a surprise for when Burl got old enough.

In the cover of the alder brush the blackflies descended on Burl in a cloud. The swarm drew blood; he felt it warm on his hand. Hunting with his father once when things were

different, when he could still get close to the man, Burl had seen a bull moose driven suicidal by blackflies. It had crashed out of the bush and hurled its great heaving body into the muskeg, where it swam out deeper and deeper until only its snout could be seen above the water. Burl felt the urge to run now but an even fiercer urge to stay put. He might outrun the blackflies, but he couldn't hope to outrun Cal. Any more than he could hope to saunter down to the river and say, "Nice place you've got here."

He allowed himself to imagine it all the same. He imagined Cal putting out his cigarette and offering him a stick of Dentyne. He imagined them taking off their shoes and socks and wading in amidst the suckers, scooping them out onto the gravel, roe squirting out every which way. "How about we fill ourselves a 45-gallon drum with these guys, put 'er up in a tree and bait ourselves some bear?" He imagined Cal saying that.

Then Burl heard a sound from behind him up on the path. It wasn't his imagination. Someone was coming. Someone whistling the same tune as Cal.

Cal heard it. He turned leisurely and his eyes went right to the sound. He dropped his cigarette on the gravel, put it out with his steel-plated toe. Then Burl watched his father's face harden into a frown, as if he'd suddenly caught a whiff of something not quite right. His hunter's eyes perused the hillside until he picked his quarry out of the newly green shrubbery.

“There better not be an idiot-kid hiding in those bushes.”

He spoke loudly, casting his big voice far enough that the someone coming heard it, too. The whistling stopped abruptly.

“Burl? That you, boy?”

Burl let the blackflies close around him then, like a veil. In his mouth, his ears, burrowing in his hair, crawling up his nose and into the corners of his eyes. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut. But even a fierce dreamer like Burl could not imagine himself out of this. When he blinked, there was Cal coming, crunching across the gravel in thousand-league boots. And Burl’s legs shrivelled under him.

“You dumb stump-for-brains,” said Cal.

Burl untangled himself, broke from cover – too late, always too late – and Cal was on him as quick as a bear on a spawning sucker.

“When you gonna learn to act your age, boy, and not your shoe size.”

Burl covered his face. But before he did, he saw the whistler, a blonde-haired woman in jeans and a brown suede jacket with fringes all along the arms. She looked anxiously his way and then ran off.

“Now look what you done,” said his father. Burl wasn’t sure what that might be, except to get himself into a Cal-sized jam.

But before the first cuff landed, another sound came out of the hot blue May sky. It was a sound like someone

beating the air with a giant hand. Swatting the side of the sky as if it were a great blue, stupid son. It was a sound different enough – unexpected enough – to slow Cal’s fist. Stop his hand, though he did not release his grip on Burl.

The sound grew nearer, a throbbing that drowned out the whir of dragonflies, the chattering of squirrels, the squawking of blue jays. It was not a train. The CPR line passed this way, but no train had ever saved Burl Crow from a beating.

A helicopter. It appeared over the ridge of spruce trees southeast of where Burl stood in his father’s grasp. It was a twin rotor, flying low, carrying something large suspended by a long cable.

The boy and the man looked up into the sun as the great noisy chopper approached, a silhouette coming straight for them.

Burl had never seen a grand piano, but he knew that’s what was hanging from the cable. Its shadow passed over him before it did. Then for one solitary instance it was suspended above him, blocking out the sun. A black hole in the blue sky. He could see the big bones of its undercarriage, its three solid legs and a flashing glimmer of its varnished, curvy side.

“Don’t you tell no one about this,” shouted his father. “Ya hear?”

Burl’s head shook violently – he heard, all right – but his eyes never left the chopper. Where had he seen something

like this? Not a piano but something else large and helpless. On the TV at Granny Robichaud's. A flood; cattle being airlifted to safety, dumb with shock, leather straps around their fat bellies. The piano was like that, Burl thought – a dumb three-legged animal.

But not dumb. It spoke to him. At the moment it was above him, even through the shattered air, he heard its song. The wind was playing that thing.

Burl followed the passage of the chopper and its strange cargo north by northwest until it was out of sight. And when he looked down again – his neck aching, dizzy from the sun, dizzy from the vision – his father was gone.