

Home Waters

My brother Bill knows most of the natural springs in north Florida. He camps near the clear, rushing water of Blue Springs or, his favorite, the Econfina (ee-kin-fine-uh). For years, he led canoe trips for birdwatchers down the Choctawhatchee (chalk-tuh-hatch-ee) and other waterways throughout the Panhandle. But it wasn't hunting the ivory-billed woodpecker that taught him to move silently through the water.

The water in Florida's natural springs is cold and clean. Filtered by limestone rock, the fresh water is as clear and perfect as blown glass. The source, or boil, is coated with colors of minerals deposited by the rushing waters – greens and blues, orange and pink. Hundreds of these portals pump millions of gallons a day from Florida's natural underground aquifer, the Floridan, the river that runs beneath the peninsula. Most of the springs aren't widely known; many are unmarked. Once they get "discovered," divers congregate at the boil many feet below, stirring up the silt with their fins, clouding the water. Even at the surface, though, the force of the flow is strong enough for me to swim as hard as I can and make no forward progress.

Early on a steamy August morning a few years ago, Lowell Kelly, a local developer, came by my brother Bill's place on Blue Creek, in Ponce de Leon, Florida. He had hired Bill to do some day labor for him, so Kelly and his friend Kevin Hicks were to drive Bill to the worksite. Nearing sixty, Bill came prepared, with his water supply, lunch and favorite hand tools. They told him to sit in the truck behind the shotgun seat, and then

drove past the small, remote Gator Pond, stopping near a dense green wall of overgrowth that blocks access to the larger swamp. Kelly got out on the driver's side and ran around the back of the truck, so that when Bill stepped out, Kelly was running at him with a baseball bat, screaming about his money. The first blow landed on Bill's head and spun him around. My brother is a big man and didn't hit the ground right away, but he was surprised – literally blindsided – by the assault and stunned by the actual blow to his head. Kelly had a moment to swing again, but this time, Bill instinctively pulled back, and the bat glanced hard off the left side of his head, inflicting more sharp pain. Blood began to pour from his torn left ear and he stumbled back. That's when he noticed that Hicks was standing by the open truck door, his right hand hidden. Bill assumed he held a gun. When my brother slipped and hit the muddy ground, Kelly was over him quickly and beat him hard, in the gut, the chest, the legs, no longer with the advantage of surprise, but with the relish of a guy on top. Bill managed to scramble away from Kelly and stood, trying to shield his head from more blows, which allowed Kelly to bash Bill's elbows and belly.

My brothers and I will jump into any body of water we find. Well, I may pick my way in, but the three of them (Bill, the oldest; Byron, just younger than I; and Bobby, the youngest) jump. They play games, mostly involving Frisbees, complicated rules and fifty years of paybacks. Sometimes I swim around them in wide circles, paddling and bending to the right, then I turn around and circle to the left, like in a folk dance.

Kelly wiped the slippery, bloody bat on his jeans before chasing Bill into a blind alley of land surrounded by swampy muck. When the dry land ran out, Bill turned and faced Kelly again, having a hard time seeing through the curtain of blood, thinking only there is nowhere else to go. Bill stumbled toward Kelly, who turned and ran back toward the truck, even though he still held the bat. So Bill, with no other options, stepped off solid ground into the muddy, lumpy swamp. He lay down, fast, on his belly. Taking a gulp of air, he went under the gray water. He slithered and slid, like his fellow animals in the water. Kelly and Hicks searched for him, yelling murderous threats. Kelly's voice could be heard for a long time, his ranting growing first louder, more insistent, and eventually more resigned, when they didn't find him. The thought of Hicks' gun kept my brother hidden. He stayed in the swamp, mostly underwater, for hours. He made no sound. He feared that lifting his head or making any noise would get him shot. He was sure that they had not intended for him to leave the swamp alive. Bill told me later that you have no fear of snakes or gators when men are hunting you with guns.

Bill paddles the big kayak out from Pass-A-Grille into the Gulf of Mexico. I sit in the bow, feeling strange not to be paddling, too, but he assures me it's okay. He wants to do this for me, because my injured elbow keeps me from getting out on the water myself. I tell him about the last time I kayaked here, when we were surrounded by dolphins. A group of about fifteen, including juveniles, circled our boat for several minutes, jumping and playing, before heading up the beach on their morning rounds. He tells me about his search for good shelling places. He and his girlfriend Lynn want to sell shell-decorated frames and mirrors to tourists. We head south to the cut at the bottom of the barrier

islands that make up Pinellas County beaches. The current is strong here and the water, very choppy. We turn into the channel, fighting the outgoing tide, as Tampa Bay waters relocate into the Gulf on their twice-daily journey. We jog right and left, slapped by the waves, our bow in the air. I move forward to weigh us down and now sit facing him, holding onto the sides. He gestures with his chin toward the north side of the channel. I look over my shoulder: the dropping tide reveals a spot of tucked away, drifted sand and heaps of shells beyond two small docks. He steers us around the docks, we pull the boat half ashore and we wade to the gorgeous pile of shells, big and tiny, rounded and pointy, white and pink and gray and orange, caught by the currents in this bend of shoreline. “We’ll come back here from the road later,” Bill says. “I’ll show you my new contraption. It’s two milk crates hanging from a yoke on my shoulders, so I can tip the crates into the surf. It works real good.”

On our way out of the channel, we ride the tide and he uses the paddle only to steer. He has practiced, smooth motions. We don’t talk about terrible things that can happen. We’re wet from the splash and, as we turn north, we face a chilly February breeze. But the sun and his confident, quiet paddling make me think about taking a nap.

From the swamp, Kelly drove to Bill’s shop and roared into the driveway. He hollered at Lynn, Bill’s girlfriend, that he had “hurt Bill, hurt him real bad.” He threw Bill’s belongings onto the dusty ground and said he would kill him if he made it home. Kelly ranted about Bill having stolen \$30,000 from his truck on Friday when Bill had last worked for him.

Here's the thing about my big brother: He is scrupulous about things like honesty and thievery. He once found a full bank bag in a Winn-Dixie parking lot and turned the whole thing in. He and Lynn live very close to the bone, mostly growing many varieties of bamboo, running a small shop just off I-10 called "Flutes and Vegetables," and leading nature trips. That, and they host visiting music acts on their wooden stage among the old live oaks and younger, leaping bamboos. They don't lock their doors. They're smart and spiritual, but not God-fearing church-goers, so they stand out in their tiny Southern town. She has bountiful wavy black hair, with streaks of gray; he wears his white hair in a ponytail and often has a beard. His name in local parts is "Bamboo Bill," and the Bill is pronounced "Bee-ull." After Kelly's visit, Lynn was scared, but she knew for certain that Bill hadn't taken Kelly's money.

The November after my mom died, all her kids and our spouses and children (nineteen in all) camped at Blue Springs (the one near the town of High Springs, in north central Florida). The weather was a prominent guest, too: First it was too cold even to sleep; then, as we warmed, the sleepy bees woke up, stinging two of the kids; and then it began to rain and didn't stop. My brother Byron, the tie-dye artist, had brought us each a t-shirt. We wore them on the last day, as we walked down the winding wooden boardwalk along the creek that leads from the boil to the Santa Fe River, strung out in ones and twos, lollipops of color against the gray downpour and the dark green scrub brush. Dyes dripped down our shorts and legs. At the final lookout, we leaned against the rough railing and watched the rain flowing into the river's flow, all that water headed to the Gulf. Bob, my youngest brother, carried the can of her ashes, and we passed it along,

down the railing. Silent, each of us poured a little of her remains into the wet air. Down went the brief spray of gray ash. Down went the surprising chunks. Down went the rain. Down went the river to the Gulf, where she loved to swim.

Bill managed to cross the swamp on his belly, and emerged onto a short dirt road called Bunny Trail. As is often the case in rural areas, Bill happened to know Little Jimmy, who lived in the last of three small houses on that road; he limped to his door and banged. Then he called Lynn and the Sheriff. When Lynn finally found him, Bill was covered in mud and blood and his left ear was hanging forward, barely attached to his head. He was alternately calm and euphoric, so happy to be alive and – for the moment – safe. Their journey through the medical system, without health insurance or cash, began at the wholly inadequate Doctors Memorial Hospital in Bonifay. As it turned out, the only medical care Bill’s ear received was administered by Lynn and their friend, the other Jimmi, who had some colloidal silver in his possession.

At the Holmes County Sheriff’s Department, Kelly was charged with Aggravated Battery. Hicks was not charged, which may have been because several close relatives of his work for the Corrections Department. Kelly’s bail was set at \$15,000.

“Aunt Molly, you gotta talk to Pa. He’s real messed up and won’t talk to me.” Lately, my teenaged nephew Harvey and I had been talking on the telephone about his conflicts with his father, my brother Bill. But now I couldn’t understand what he was saying through his agitation and the remains of what we call a cracker accent, even though he repeated it to me. What had happened to my brother? What?

Bobby, our youngest brother, called me back from the parking lot outside a biker bar. He'd just finished packing keyboards and amps into his van after a gig and was weeping quietly about Bill being beaten so badly. He kept talking about the baseball bat, about what a good ball player Bill had been. I remembered showing up in Parma, Ohio, one summer in my twenties, surprising Bill at a bright green baseball field. In my mind I could see him again, leaning on the green fence in the late afternoon summer light, the kind that lingers so you don't believe the day will ever end. I watched him play in the National Slow Pitch Softball Tournament, drank a lot of beer, and yelled myself hoarse. His team, Nelson Painting, became national champs; Bill hit eleven home runs.

Bill's initial calm-giddiness soon gave way to alternating panic and weeping, trouble making even simple decisions, and constant worry. The other thing you ought to know about Bill is that he had always occupied a confident, quiet masculine space. He was overwhelmed by the assault and doubly troubled by his emotional reaction to it. He told me he couldn't let his kids see him like this. Then, when word got around that Kelly had hired someone to "finish the job," Bill realized that they couldn't stay home, couldn't run their shop, couldn't take care of the extensive plant nursery. Turns out, Kelly has two prior convictions for Aggravated Battery and one for Solicitation, having paid someone to hurt a third party. A longtime lawyer in the Florida panhandle told a friend of Bill's, "That Lowell Kelly is crazier than a cockroach on bug spray."

Bill told me not to come. It's not safe here. Lynn told me I'm the only one he can talk to. Bill told me don't let Byron (our middle brother) come up here, with a gun. They have a bigger army than we do, and more weapons.

I floated on my back, eyes closed, half listening to the kids challenge each other and to my brothers' ancient taunts. I felt light raindrops on my eyelids, my lips. The water from the sky rolled off my face into the spring pool. When the sprinkling stopped, I opened my eyes. The light gray clouds bleached to white, then gray again, propelled across the distant blue. I wondered what I could say about my mother, later, when we gathered in a circle to honor her.

Except when there's a drought, rain interspersed with sunlight is common in Florida. So, it follows that rainbows are common. I have resisted being impressed by them. But, on this day, between the showers, looking up from floating in the spring, I saw something I'd never seen before. It was a rainbow, but it was upside down; it arced in a U shape, rather than the conventional two-ends-near-the-ground orientation. Immediately, I lifted my head and turned fully around, so I could look from a different angle, thinking I had seen it wrong. From any angle, the clear spectrum of colors presented itself in this strange shape. "Hey, Bob," I called to my nearest brother, "did you see that?" I pointed at the sky.

He rolled his head around and, seeing it, chuckled, "Now, that's a rainbow. That's a Mom rainbow."

Byron saw it and hollered, in his huge voice, "It's smiling!"

I looked up again, checking: Still there. I thought, this is our Cheshire Cat, our mother haunting us, looking goofy and unlikely.

My brother and Lynn went into hiding. They've moved from place to place ever since, sometimes resting with friends, but always for a short time and always hovering near enough that Lynn could visit her ailing mother every couple of weeks. They stayed in places without heat or power in the coldest winter anyone can remember. Lynn developed a cough that hung on too long. Bill's bruises began to fade and his ear began to heal, but his moodiness and jumpiness stayed. Amid ongoing periods of confusion and abdominal pain, he hatched and abandoned a hundred plans – for the next safe stop, to sell enough of their belongings to buy food and gas. They never put anything in their names, which meant that they couldn't really live anywhere or get jobs. After they discovered that one of Kelly's prior convictions involved pipe bombs in the mailboxes of people he believed had stolen marijuana from him, they couldn't have anyone pick up their mail for them, either.

Along St. Pete Beach runs a shifting sand bar. At low tide, you can often walk out to it through darker green, chest high water and be back in shallow water with a visible white sand bottom. You can carry young children through the dark moat, and they can stand, almost on the beach again, but no longer on the water's edge. When our kids were little, we would haul the whole passel of cousins out there to explore. Once, my son Matt and I found the sand bar covered with a coat of sand dollars. He bent down in that chubby toddler, wide stance way and picked one up. He held out the gray, fuzzy disk to me, squinting up into the bright day. I turned it over to see the tiny, moving, living parts, swishing it in the water again, to keep the animal moist. "Put out your hand like this," I

showed him my outstretched palm. Then I put the sand dollar on his hand and we waited for him to feel the tiny tickles.

A man in the water nearby called over, “Did you see all these sand dollars?” He held up a mesh bag full of them. We nodded. “Do you want some to take home, young man? I’ll give you some.”

Matt looked at the sand dollar, still on his hand, and said, “But this is their home.”

In January 2010, five months after the beating, everyone was finally deposed, following which the State’s Attorney charged Hicks, the second guy, with Principal to Aggravated Battery. Kelly’s charge was maintained. Because Bill and Lynn’s depositions were credible, their risk level seemed to increase: their testimony could hurt both Kelly and Hicks. So, they focused their lives around each court date, thinking each time that there would be some resolution; instead, each one led only to another continuance, and they went back into hiding. No one could tell for sure how realistic Bill’s fear was, but the general consensus remained that Kelly’s dangerousness followed from his being foolish, vengeful and unpredictable, and because he had enormous resources.

Prior to living in Florida, we had been knocked about, the way the rough ocean throws around shells and driftwood. Children in a little boat, with no one at the helm, we were subject to the bad things that happen to unprotected children. We shipwrecked onto the quiet shore of the Gulf of Mexico. We learned to swim and sit in the sun. We learned to eat fruit from the trees and fish from the water. Suited to the rhythms of the place, we became “natives.”

In April, when Bill and Lynn had been on the road for eight months, the Deepwater Horizon well exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. In response to what has been called the largest environmental disaster in United States history, local disaster relief efforts, alongside British Petroleum-supported clean-up operations, began in May. Small companies rushed in to train “hazwoppers” (hazardous waste operations workers, as distinguished from the “hazmat” people, who handle the actual material), offering motel housing, a generous per diem, and good pay. When he heard about the training course, Bill had just set up their table at a large flea market in central Florida. Like gypsies with their cart, he and Lynn had become itinerant merchants, traveling with small craft items, knickknacks, and photographs. A series of rainy weekends had made the setting-up effort almost worthless, but – as they pointed out – they didn’t have anything better to do. On this sunny Sunday, they talked for only a few minutes about the training course before repacking their little car and driving seven hours to Panama City Beach. They slept a few hours in the car and showed up early for the class at the Emerald Coast Church of God, both of them itching to be part of something good. Like everyone else who loves the Gulf, they worried about damage to the entire ecosystem. Bill reckons they looked terrific compared to most people who could be available on short notice to relocate and work full-time.

They both completed the course and started working, ten hours a day, seven days a week, on the beaches at Pensacola. Physically grueling because of the heat and the Tyvek suits, walking the beaches was only preparatory; no oil had arrived. Although that

job didn't last long, Bill is used to physical labor and moved to other sites along the coast; he also completed online hazwopper supervisor training in the tired evenings.

When I am away from the Gulf of Mexico, I refer to it as “my gulf”: my home waters, my truest habitat. And I have always felt the waters there to be female, to be holding and accepting like a great earth mother, to be connected to the Divine Feminine. I always go in, even when a storm leaves darkness in the water and I will find grit in my bathingsuit later. Even when it's too cold and I have to wear a wetsuit. Even when no one else in sight is near the water. Sometimes a ritual submerging is enough, going down, as deep as the salt water lets me, coming up with wet seal skin. Sometimes, walking along these waters, any time of day or night, is when I remember who I am. Sometimes, though, I need to swim, swim far and strong through the streaming, swelling water.

Matt, now grown, and I visit Pass-A-Grille, where no oil has been sighted yet – to be in the water while we still can.

Bill calls me from a boat heading into the Gulf from Panama City early in the morning. “You would love this. The sun on the water, the sweet salt air.” I can hear the boat's engines, or maybe the wind.

“Is there any oil?” I ask, sitting up in bed.

“Not yet. We can't see underneath, where the actual oil is, just the sheen. But when we find it, we radio in coordinates, so they'll know where it probably is.”

“And then what?”

“Other boats will go out with booming material and surround it. The hazmatters.”

I checked the clock: 8. “Hey, do we need to get off the phone? I can call you tonight.”

“No, it’s good. I have a lot of minutes now. And this phone isn’t traceable.”

I lean back onto my pillow, free to picture him on the water. “So, how long will you be out on the boat?”

“All day. There are hundreds of these VOO boats, making money since they can’t fish.”

“Vroom boats, like power boats, you mean?”

“No, ‘Vessel of Opportunity’ boats. That’s the fleet we have. But I don’t work the boat at all.”

“Oh, so you just get to be on the water...on a boat...in the Gulf.”

“Now you see why I said you would love it.”

On September 2nd, 2010, another oil drilling platform burns in the Gulf of Mexico, following an explosion. The radio reports a mile-long sheen on the water. “No casualties” must mean that no humans working on the well died, because there will be unavoidable casualties in marine life.

Now, on September 3rd, the radio reports that neither an explosion nor a leak has occurred. Not only is this well in more shallow water and this mishap less serious than the Deepwater Horizon spill in April, we are told that pumping was stopped prior to the fire. That this leak compares favorably to the worst environmental disaster ever does not reassure me. That the second day’s reports sound like obvious spin strengthens the doubts that already plague me. Government scientists and others recently reported that the

massive oil that gushed for months from the Deepwater well is mostly gone. Gone? Even if it's in smaller bits and at greater depths and harder for us to see, it's still there. If it's consumed by oil-eating microbes, it's still there in the food chain. Dispersed doesn't mean rendered non-existent. Haven't we been paying attention all these years to the discourse about ecological systems and interdependent webs of life?

Now, on September 4th, I read in the *Boston Globe* that 133 fires or explosions occurred on rigs in the Gulf of Mexico last year. My reactions teeter between personal grief about harm to the Gulf and angry mistrust of an anonymous system that allows this harm and then misinforms us about it.

I live a long way from my Florida Gulf Coast upbringing, and I miss my home waters. Now I need to go to the Gulf again, as I did after the big Deepwater spill. As I often do.

Bill calls from the boat going into Appalachicola Bay at the end of the day. We talk about his place on Blue Creek, where the house and shop are surrounded by bamboo.

“Is there any chance you'll go back there?”

“No. That's done. We'll sell it soon as we can. We can't go back.”

“Even after the trial?”

“We can't live in that town. I always want to leave as soon as we get there.”

“Yeah, I know. But I'm sad about you leaving all the bamboo.”

“Well, I dug up a bunch when we left, put them where people would appreciate them. When we find another place, we'll probably go back and get some more. But

they're mostly set now, anyway. Most bamboos are impossible to kill, once they're set. I just wish we could get some of them to grow where you are.”

Organisms that live in the intratidal zones, the area between the high tide and low tide lines on the shore, have to be able to survive both flood conditions and periods of drought.

In August, 2010, almost a year after the assault, Bill was back working out of Panama City Beach, with a barge that accepted oily waste – except that hardly any came. He went out on a VOO boat, one of only four still operating at his venue, and sat on a tugboat next to the barge, waiting. His assignments had become unpredictable and he expected every day to be told the job was over. Bill had heard talk about most of the oil being “gone” but didn’t find it credible. Whenever oil was actually found, small boats with tanks surrounded it and sprayed dispersant. He figured all the remaining oil was below the surface and that the overuse of dispersants would damage everything the oil didn’t. When the trial and the cleanup job ended, he and Lynn planned to head to other waters – or other lands – because he believed the waters of the Gulf, my gulf, wouldn’t be producing anything good for a long time.

Despite the judge’s announcement that there would be no more continuances, the August trial, scheduled to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the assault, was continued, yet again. Bill’s job ended, but his hopes about protecting the Gulf had ended weeks earlier. He and Lynn went back on the road.

In October – fourteen months after his assault – Bill and Lynn drove west along Highway 10, to meet me in New Orleans. I’d gone down, as I do every year, to help rebuild homes damaged in the 2005 hurricanes. This year the economic recovery of New Orleans, another favorite Gulf area, had been set back further by the BP oil spill, but we didn’t detect greater need among the already disenfranchised people with whom we work. For a couple of days, Bill and I worked together clapboarding the front of a house. Then he and Lynn left us at work and drove east to Tallahassee for pre-trial meetings and, we all hoped, the trial itself.

Bill called me the next day while I painted kitchen cabinets. My hands were paint-spattered a deep rose color and my face was sweaty wet, as I fished my phone out of my back pocket and tried to hear him.

“I have to make the decision. The State’s Attorney says it’s my call.” Had I walked into the middle of the conversation?

“Hang on, let me go outside.” I set down my brush and weaved my way out of the house between people sanding the front porch, ducking between ladders and keeping my head down to keep the (probably lead paint) dust out of my face. I walked away from the house, wiped my cheek on my t-shirt and pushed the bandana away from my ear. “Okay, what happened? Aren’t you doing witness preparation today?”

“Kelly’s lawyer offered a plea deal. Kelly would plead no contest and be adjudicated guilty. He’d be sentenced to two years of house arrest and eight years probation.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah. And I don’t know what to do. I can’t stand the thought of him not serving any time behind bars. Being stuck in one of his mansions is way too easy time for what he did to me. And we’ve been focused on the trial for so long. All our preparation ... and writing ... and thinking have been for this trial.”

“When do you have to decide?”

“As soon as possible. The witnesses are all here. Maybe an hour?”

We spent most of that hour on the phone, while I walked around the Freret neighborhood. I saw enough houses in need of our services that I knew we wouldn’t run out of rehabbing work any year soon.

At Ft. DeSoto Beach, we wander along the shady pine-needled path, out onto hot sand. We walk between the dunes and the sea, then in the surf itself. We spot crabs skittering around in the shallows. In the hard sand above the tide line, we see hundreds of their holes, alongside collections of the tiny sand balls they throw out to make temporary homes, homes only till the next storm blows the surf across them or the next moon draws a higher tide.

Birds are all around – herons, egrets, sandpipers, gulls. I spot a small green heron I remember seeing here before. Lynn photographs the birds. She tells me about cranes, white geese, and swallow-tailed kites they’ve seen on their travels around Florida this year.

Bill loads buckets of shells into the rental car trunk and we make our way, salty and sun-tired, across the first causeway. As we’re stopped at the light before turning

toward the Gulf beaches, Lynn points out ibises in a little pond by the side of the road. She raises her camera and shoots. On both sides are long pools of shallow water, overfull ditches surrounded by scrub foliage. Our light changes green and, without warning, I U-turn.

“You didn’t need to go and do that, Molly. I got a picture already.” Lynn thinks I drive recklessly, but she doesn’t live in Boston.

“No, no, I know.” I can’t say it right; I’m too excited. I pull off the road, pointing out my window, to the other end of the little pond, at the big pink birds with the funny bills. “Look! Are those roseate spoonbills?”

“You’re right, you’re right! Can we get closer?” Lynn has her camera poised.

I pull back onto the road, cross onto the other side and drive up a dirt road that does not appear to be maintained for this purpose. Dense shrubs and scrub pines separate us from the strange, pink waders. We stop and search where we guess they are, but we can’t find them again.

In the end, Bill accepted the plea, because the verdict would be definite, rather than uncertain, as in a jury trial, and secure, meaning it wouldn’t be subject to appeal. Without explanation, Kelly’s sentence was changed to six and a half months house arrest and seven years probation. The agreement wasn’t a relief for Bill and Lynn: The loss of their organizing principle left them feeling even more adrift. As they await the possibility of a civil suit, none of the things they had planned to do after the trial seem right anymore. And, in the two years that they have now been without a safe harbor, they’ve grown accustomed to being rudderless, with their few pleasures and their familiar

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frustrations. I wonder what will become of them now, on what shore they will land, and where they will put down roots.