

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

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The Battle of Falmouth Springs

I had been counting down all day, watching the clock more than anything else. There were only five more minutes until the last school bell of 1985. The agony was excruciating. It was the longest five minutes I've ever spent waiting. My buddies and I had our last summer vacation together planned to a T. This was going to be the final hoo-rah, our last summer together, so we were determined to make it count. All we had to do is get through the closing school bell, and it was on.

Our *Gang*, the *Magnificent Seven*, or eight if you count my little brother Jace, is what we called ourselves. He often tagged along to even out the teams. Jace wasn't an official member of the gang yet but was always willing and able to step up to the plate. My brother looked nothing like me. He was a little smaller and skinnier. He had the look of our parents, which always turned into a poke of fun at holiday tables about my mother and a sexy mailman years ago. I was a husky linebacker, while Jace was meant to cover the center field. His hair was straight. Mine was always a curly mess.

We were a bunch of semi-wild teenagers who lived on the edge of nowhere, always dirty, and consistently poor in material things but never spirit. We all lived in the same proximity, at the end of a long dusty dirt road, smothered in miles and miles of yellow pines. These pines were all placed in rows. In nice neat rows, these tall creatures stood, waiting for their time to be chopped down and turned into lumber.

In the middle of the manmade forests were our homesteads. They were miniature farms that our parents carved on the landscape, complete with gardens, and the usual four legged and feathered friends that made up a farm. The smell of pine wafted heavily over the cow piles in our tiny fields. Those piles served two purposes. They helped our gardens grow and they also provided us with mushrooms after a summer rain, the magic kind.

John, Eric, and I had all enlisted in the military, so this last crusade would be epic for us. We would be shipping out in two weeks. John joined The Marines. His Dad was a Marine, so it was his natural duty to keep his family tradition alive. He even looked like a Marine, always sporting a buzz cut. John had piercing eyes too. The ones that you could feel cutting into you. No one ever won a staring contest against him either. Come to think of it, I rarely ever saw him blink. He was the adventurous one, willing to be the first into an unknown dark cavern or the first to scale a cliff.

Eric and I joined the Army. Eric as an infantryman and I as a helicopter mechanic, like my old man. We were both crack shots, but Eric was extremely good at hitting moving targets. He only wore shoes to school and church. The soles of his feet were black and hard from years of running shoeless through the Florida landscape. Sandspurs were nothing to Eric. Once, he shot a red fox squirrel on a full out sprint off the top branch of a tree. We all ran over to claim his kill for dinner until we noticed that squirrel had balls bigger than ours. We poked at them for a while, contemplating whether we should cook him up or if something nuclear was going on.

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We ultimately decided to leave him for nature to claim, mostly because we wanted to keep our own balls safe.

James and Marc were sophomores. They were next in line to command our gang and at the end of these two weeks, would be the keepers of the staff. Our staff was a crooked old stick crested with a snapping turtle shell one of us had found and a few colorful streamers of ripped up towels. It wasn't anything overly exciting, but it was our banner of glory. Whoever won the battle of the season got to keep it until the next fight.

James loved science and looked the part too. He gave meaning to the word nerd, complete with a pair of thick black glasses taped together at the nose. The tape also bound the fact that his family was dirt poor. We all knew that James would be the one to lift his family curse someday and become a scientist. He was our thinker, our MacGyver, and Marc was our resident Eagle Scout, always primmed and proper. I swear he lived on Rice Krispies and Kool-Aid. His parents were always working, or at the church, so hot meals were few and far between for him. Ironically James ate better than Marc. They both worked hand-in-hand to come up with some of the most fantastic booby traps we had ever seen. James would think it up, and Marc would execute. There was usually rope and knots involved, and Marc knew how to tie all the knots with his eyes closed. He once caught a feral pig with an extension cord, which we drug back to his house to fatten up for later.

Willie and Bo were both newbies. They were freshmen and had been chomping at the bits to be a part of our gang. They were often used as scouts, trackers of the other team, and almost always the first to come under fire. Newbies were commonly used for that purpose. Willie had a wildness about him that superseded the rest of us. His actions were always accompanied by a lion's roar. He was raised by his grandmother, who used to be a sharecropper back in the day.

Granny's shack was old and grey, much like her, but she still had her wits about her. The walls of her shack were full of the smells of her fried catfish over the years. Granny would always show us up, down by the river, with her long cane pole and catch more catfish than the rest of us combined. Putting our newer poles and spinning reels to shame was one thing she loved to do. Then we would head back, and watch granny cook us up a feast of catfish, collards, and strawberry pie. She made the best collard greens and taught us the recipe, which I still make today. A cup of sugar, a half cup of salt, six dried chilies', not four or five, and a mess of collards is all that is needed for the perfect memory of granny.

Bo was a mechanic by means of hand-me-down learnin'. Years down at his dad's gas station, holding this and cutting that honed his skills for our benefit. He always wore greasy jeans and a worn-out white tank top. No matter how hard he tried, his hands would not come clean. They were a calloused mass of soot and axle grease. Nevertheless, he kept our dirt bikes in tip-top shape.

We had a few dirt bikes between us, and those who didn't have a bike, would hop on the back between the driver and the gear. We had pre-packed our equipment and had our bikes ready for our next adventure into the old-growth forests, which lay beyond our home in the yellow

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piners. Our swim trunks, camping gear, fishing poles, and BB guns were all strapped onto the fenders of our bikes waiting for that last bell. Sometimes we would even bring spare BB guns. You never knew when one would get bent.

The bell just rang! The long-awaited and anticipated adventure was about to begin! It was the loudest bus ride home full of hootin' and hol-lerin', and our last words to each other as we ran off in different directions were, "Let's meet at Falmouth!" A quick sweep through our homes and a kiss on mom's cheek followed by a, "Don't get hurt!" and an, "Ok Mom." Marked the beginning of our freestyle escapade.

Beyond our immediate neighborhood in the pines lied a vast expanse of wilderness. It was our wilderness, our home away from home, which we knew almost every inch of. Our territory consisted of three convergences of the Florida landscape: The Suwannee River State Park, Twin Rivers State Forest, and Falmouth Springs. Our interest was not in the campgrounds that people frequented but, rather, the untouched parts, the wild portions of the wilderness, where we blazed our own trails. It was about a ten-mile triangle that we shared with only a few who dared to venture out into the backwoods, and the orbs, the old spirits who lived there.

The living souls who encountered us there, I'm convinced, thought our gang were nuts. They usually caught a glimpse of us running through the woods in battle dress and full camouflage, wielding our Mossberg pump-action BB guns, and shooting each other. The orbs, on the other hand, were entertained by our antics. We would see them often wherever we were in the forest. It seemed they liked watching us and hanging out near our camps at night. They became a regular part of our nights in the forest. Green balls of light the size of cantaloupes would float through the trees beyond our campfire light. It was frightening at first, but they grew on us as much as we probably grew on those spirits. I felt safe when they were around. I pictured them as some sharecroppers from a distant time, or Indians, that only knew this land as their home.

These backwoods were an entanglement of old twisted trees, branches, and vines. Cypress Knees were an excellent cover to hide behind. It smelled like mud and freshly fallen rain out there mainly because nothing ever dried up completely. Carpets of palmetto bushes, tall grasses, and briars made up the forest floor. Everything was sharp, and besides that, every living creature in the forest wanted to eat us. From the mosquitos to the big yellow eight-legged Golden Silk Orb-Weaver Spiders, to the occasional rattlesnake or gator sighting, the Great Suwannee River was the life force of the forest. It was the magnet that drew everything near its banks.

Our wilderness triangle was also dotted with remnants of history that the river also drew to it. We often used these places when no one was around. When the post office of *Old Ellaville* closed in 1942, it left behind a scattered ruin of old brick and mortar covered in leaves and moss. This was on the west end of our forest, just up from the mouth of the *Withlacoochee River*, yes you heard it right, the *Withlacoochee*. The old *Fort Columbus Graveyards* were close by and were full of interesting headstones from the late 1800s. We used the *Old Hillman Bridge* to cross the Suwannee most of the time. The rusted eye beams kept us from the current and other things lurking in the slow-moving river of brown tea. I heard somewhere,

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the tannic acid in the cypress trees is what turns the water a murky brown. The other landmarks were *Little Gem Springs*, and *Line Sinks*, an old dry creek bed most of the time caused by sinkholes sucking the water back underground. There were a lot of Indian mounds in this area. At least we thought they were Indian mounds. By these landmarks, we traversed our claimed territory and left our skin behind at most of them.

Falmouth Springs was our headquarters. It was where we started and where we ended our adventures. It was off the beaten path. Some locals would swim there like us, but generally, it was a secret place. Our first night, we would spend just over the hill from Falmouth, where our favorite camp was. It was the closest spring to our homes, and we had blazed a trail directly to the camp through the pine farms. Only we knew this trail because we made it and because it avoided any civilization on the way. It took us about fifteen minutes to get there, which would otherwise be thirty if we used highway 90 and packed in from the other way.

Jace and I were the first to show up this night. Jace gathered wood while I got the fire going. From our trail, you could see the flames from far away. It was a beacon for the rest of the gang, who trickled in two in tow. John and Eric took the canteens to the spring to fill, while James and Marc cooked our first meal of spam and beans in a makeshift pot we left at the site. Willie and Bo showed up later with a six-pack of beer that they usually buried behind Bo's Dad's store and would retrieve at night when no one was looking. We planned the next few days around the fire, downed the beer, and sipped on a jug of homemade Mushroom Kool-Aid. This concoction of psilocybin, sugar, and strawberry Kool-Aid was a staple for our outings. It was cheap entertainment for us all, but that is a whole other story.

The first day was all Springs and swimming. It was Saturday. It was also when other people, including pretty girls in bikinis, would come to the springs and swim. It was indeed a special day when Betty Ann showed up. She was John's half-sister and had the longest silkiest dirty blond hair. I think she had a crush on me, so perfecting my charm was particularly apparent when she was around. Of course, I had to deal with the onslaught of sarcasm from the rest of the gang on days like that and into the night.

Our mission was to see how many ladies we could convince to swing off the rope swing and fall into the water. Lost bikini tops were often our reward. This would sometimes happen from the impact of a pretty young lady flailing about uncontrollably and landing the wrong way upon impact. Did I mention the water was crystal clear? This was always first on our list of things to do.

Day two was battle time. Our pre-planned pickup time was 10:00am. My Dad picked up our team, myself, Jace, John, and Bo, and took us to the sinks. We met him on the main road. He doubled back and picked up Eric, James, Marc, and Willie, and dropped them off at the cemetery. These would be our spike camps where we would set off the next morning back towards Falmouth. A bird's eye view put our camps about three miles apart, and Falmouth was every bit of six miles away. Our goal, to battle our way back to Falmouth and capture our staff, was our only plan from then on.

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Our team had the advantage. We were on the near side of the Suwannee. This meant team two had to cross the river. They would use the Hillman bridge, so we planned our first ambush in the thick brush of the riverbank on our side of the bridge. Our spike camps were safe zones. We could not attack them in theirs, nor they in ours. It was foggy that morning along the banks, as we lay waiting for the enemy to advance. The air was thick and dripping off the trees, tapping all the leaves below. The aroma of bacon and campfire was flowing down river with the fog from the campground nearby.

We must have been there for over an hour smelling that bacon, huddled silently behind trees and shrubs. Suddenly I felt a sting on the back of my neck! At first, I thought it was a bee. Then I heard a wizz go by. I didn't even hear the crack of the BB gun. It was Eric and his posse! They had crossed upriver and doubled back behind us. I yelled, "Ambush!" I turned and quickly started firing at things that looked like bodies from way off. My team followed suit until one BB finally found a human target. We heard an ouch and saw some movement. Now we knew where they were. The battle continued converging closer and closer to each other. BB's were flying through the air at Mach speed. It was dangerous to be anywhere in the vicinity.

In the fog of war, confusion sets in quickly. We had a rule of no more than three pumps per shot, but as we converged, Marc had one long-distance shot still loaded in the chamber. When Bo dove out from behind a cypress knee, Marc let him have it. Pow! Right in the meat of his calf. It went through his pants and into his leg. I yelled, "Medic!" and the battle ceased. On rare occasions, when a BB would pierce our skin, we would call off the struggle to administer first aid. Duct tape and a fuzzy leaf of Lambs Ear would usually do the trick. It was a short battle, but an epic one, while it lasted! With Eric's team soppin' wet and my team battle scarred, we decided to head back to Falmouth and recover.

This was the last of the battles of Falmouth Springs, that is for us anyway. Bo got initiated into the gang that night as a veteran. He wasn't a newbie anymore. He had a battle scar to prove it. We limped back to Falmouth to hand over the staff to Bo. All of us were full of whelps and bruises. We spent a couple more days out there recovering in the ice-cold spring. James caught Poison Ivy. John, Eric, and I went to Basic Training a few days later. I never saw John again. I found Eric a couple years later at *Camp Warrior* in Korea, where we exchanged memorable moments and laughs for the next year or so. My kid brother eventually took over the reins and the staff of the *Magnificent Seven*. I am told the orbs still float around the forest looking for half-wild teenagers to camp with, which makes me wonder, are the trails we blazed all grown over now, and are there still some kids left who dare to play out there?