"Rainy River"

This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us.

Even now, the story makes me squirm. For more than 20 years, I've had to live with the shame. By putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. Still, it's a hard story to tell.

All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. At least, that's how I thought of myself back in the summer of 1968. Tim O'Brien: a secret hero, the Lone Ranger. If the evil were evil enough, if the good were good enough—I would simply tap that secret reservoir of courage inside me.

That emergency came one day in June of 1968, a month after I graduated from Macalester College in Minnesota. I was 21 years old. I remember opening up a letter, scanning the first few lines, and feeling the blood go thick behind my eyes. I had been drafted to fight in a war I hated.

The American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. The facts were shrouded in uncertainty: Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, when, and why? Was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, a nationalist savior, or both or neither? America was divided on these and 1,000 other issues, and the debate had spilled out into the streets.

While holding the letter, I remember hearing a sound in my head. It wasn't thinking; it was just a silent howl. A million things all at once. I was too *good* for this war. I was above it. A mistake, maybe—a foul-up in the paperwork. I was no soldier. I hated Boy Scouts. I hated camping and hated dirt and tents and mosquitoes. The sight of blood made me queasy, and I didn't know a rifle from a slingshot.

I remember too the rage in my stomach. Later it burned down to a smoldering self-pity, then to numbness. At dinner that night, my father asked what my plans were.

"Nothing," I said. "Wait."

I spent the summer of 1968 working in an Armour meat-packing plant in my hometown of Worthington, Minnesota. The plant specialized in pork products, and for eight hours a day, I stood on a quarter-mile assembly line—more properly, a disassembly line—removing blood clots from the necks of dead pigs. My job title was Declotter.

After slaughter, the hogs were decapitated, split down the length of the belly, pried open, eviscerated, and strung up by the hind hocks on a high conveyer belt. Then gravity took over. By the time a carcass reached my spot on the line, the fluids had mostly drained out, everything except for thick clots of blood in the neck and upper chest cavity.

To remove the stuff, I used a kind of water gun. The machine was suspended from the ceiling by a heavy rubber cord. At one end was a trigger; at the muzzle end was a small nozzle and a steel roller brush.

As a carcass passed by, you'd lean forward and swing the gun up against the clots and squeeze the trig

ger. The brush would whirl and water would come shooting out, and you'd hear a quick splattering sound as the clots dissolved into a fine red mist. It was not pleasant work. Goggles were a necessity, as was a rubber apron, but even so, it was like standing for eight hours a day under a lukewarm blood-shower.

At night I'd go home smelling of pig. I couldn't wash it out. Even after a hot bath, scrubbing hard, the stink was there—like old bacon or sausage, a dense, greasy pig-stink that soaked deep into my skin and hair. It was tough getting dates that summer.

In the evenings, I'd sometimes borrow my father's car and drive aimlessly around town, feeling sorry for myself, thinking about the war and the pig factory and how my life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter. I felt paralyzed. All around me, the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out. The waiting lists for the National Guard and Reserves were impossibly long; my health was solid; my religious beliefs didn't disqualify me either.

Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. Once people are dead, you can't make them undead, and I did not want to die.

At some point in mid-July, I began thinking seriously about Canada. The border lay a few hundred miles north, an eight-hour drive. Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it, to just take off and run and never stop.

In the beginning, the idea seemed purely a dream. But soon, I began to imagine it clearly. I saw the sorry details of my own future—a hotel room in Winnipeg, a battered suitcase, my father's eyes as I tried to explain myself over the telephone.

Run, I'd think. Then I'd think, *Impossible*. Then a second later I'd think, *Run*. I couldn't make up my mind.

I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends, family, my whole history—everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted; it was easy to imagine people sitting at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the O'Brien kid, how the sissy had taken off for Canada.

At work one morning, standing on the pig line, I cracked. I dropped my water gun. Quickly, almost without thought, I took off my apron and walked out of the plant and drove home. It was midmorning, and the house was empty. I was covered with blood and hog-stink. I took a hot shower. I packed a suitcase and carried it out to the kitchen.

I stood very still for a few minutes, looking carefully at the familiar objects all around me. The old chrome toaster, the telephone, the pink and white Formica on the kitchen counters. The room was full of sunshine. Everything sparkled. *My house*, I thought. *My life*. I'm not sure how long I stood there, but later I scribbled a short note to my parents.

What it said, exactly, I don't recall now. Something vague. Taking off, will call, love Tim.

I drove north.

I headed straight west along the Rainy River, which separates Minnesota from Canada and which, for me, separated one life from another. The land was mostly wilderness, unfolding in great sweeps of pine and birch and sumac.

Though it was still August, the air already had the smell of October, football season, piles of yellow-red leaves, everything crisp and clean. I remember a huge blue sky. Off to my right was the Rainy River, wide as a lake in places, and beyond the Rainy River was Canada.

I began looking for a place to lie low for a day or two. I was exhausted and scared sick. I pulled into an old fishing resort called the Tip Top Lodge. Actually it was just eight or nine tiny yellow cabins clustered on a peninsula that jutted northward into the Rainy River.

The place was in sorry shape. There was a dangerous wooden dock and a flimsy tar-paper boathouse along the shore. I got out of the car and walked up to the front porch.

The man who opened the door was Elroy Berdahl: 81 years old, skinny and shrunken and mostly bald. The old man took one look at me and went right to the heart of things—a kid in trouble. When I asked for a room, Elroy nodded, led me out to one of the cabins, and dropped a key in my hand.

"Dinner at 5:30," he said. "You eat fish?"

"Anything," I said.

We spent six days together at the Tip Top Lodge. Just the two of us. Tourist season was over. There were no boats on the river, and the wilderness seemed to withdraw into a permanent stillness. Over those six days, Elroy Berdahl and I took most of our meals together. In the mornings, we sometimes went out on long hikes into the woods, and at night, we listened to records or sat reading in front of his stone fireplace.

Elroy accepted me into his quiet routine without fuss or ceremony, the same way he might have sheltered a stray cat. In all those hours, he never asked the obvious question: Why was I there?

One thing for certain—he knew I was in desperate trouble. I was wired and jittery. My skin felt too tight. After supper one evening, I vomited and went back to my cabin, then I vomited again. Another time, in the middle of the afternoon, I began sweating and couldn't shut it off.

At night I'd toss in bed, half awake, half dreaming, imagining how I'd sneak down to the beach and quietly push one of the old man's boats out into the river and start paddling my way toward Canada. I imagined weird things, like getting chased by the Border Patrol—helicopters and searchlights and barking dogs. I'd be crashing through the woods, I'd be down on my hands and knees, people shouting my name, the law closing in on all sides—my hometown draft board and the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It all seemed crazy and impossible.

But it was possible. I knew it.

On the sixth day, the old man took me fishing on the Rainy River. The afternoon was sunny and cold. A stiff breeze came in from the north. The boat rocked sharply as we pushed off from the dock. The current was fast. All around us was an unpeopled vastness, trees and sky and water reaching out toward nowhere.

For 10 or 15 minutes, Elroy held a course upstream, the river choppy and silver gray; then he turned straight north and put the engine on full throttle. I felt the bow lift beneath me and the wind in my ears. For a time, I didn't pay attention to anything, just feeling the cold spray against my face. Then I realized that at some point we must have passed into Canadian waters, across that dotted line between two different worlds.

A sudden tightness squeezed my chest as I looked up and watched the Canadian shore come at me. This wasn't a dream. It was real. As we came in toward land, Elroy cut the engine about 20 yards offshore. The old man didn't look at me or speak. Bending down, he opened up his tackle box and busied himself with a bobber and a piece of wire leader, humming to himself, his eyes down.

I'll never be certain, of course, but I think he had planned it. He meant to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge, then to let me choose for myself. The man knew.

I stared at the old man, then at my hands, then at Canada. The shoreline was dense with brush and timber. I could see tiny red berries on the bushes. I could see a squirrel up in one of the birch trees, a big crow looking at me from a boulder along the river. That close—20 yards. I could do it. I could jump and swim for my life.

I can still feel that pressure in my chest—the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier.

What would you do?

You're 21 years old. You're scared. Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams—all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?

I tried to swallow it back. I tried to smile, except I was crying.

Now, perhaps, you can understand why I've never told this story before. It's not just the embarrassment of tears. That's part of it, but what embarrasses me much more, and always will, is the paralysis that took my heart. A moral freeze: I couldn't decide, I couldn't act. All I could do was cry. Quietly, not bawling, just the chest-chokes.

At the rear of the boat, Elroy Berdahl pretended not to notice. He held a fishing rod in his hands, his head bowed to hide his eyes. He kept humming a soft, monotonous little tune. Everywhere, it seemed, in the trees and water and sky, a great worldwide sadness came pressing down on me, a crushing sorrow, sorrow like I had never known it before.

Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness, a drowning sensation, as if I had toppled overboard and was being swept away by the silvery waves.

Chunks of my own history flashed by. I saw a 12-year-old Little League shortstop pivoting to turn a double play; I saw a 16-year-old kid decked out for his first prom, looking spiffy in a white tux. My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything I had ever been or ever wanted to be.

The little aluminum boat rocked softly beneath me. I willed myself overboard. I gripped the edge of the boat and leaned forward and thought, *Now.*

I did try. It just wasn't possible.

All those eyes on me—my mother's and father's, the town's; I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life. I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! they yelled. Turncoat! I felt myself blush. I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery or the disgrace. Even in my imagination, the shore just 20 yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was.

And right then I submitted.

I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to. That was the sad thing. And so I sat in the bow of the boat and cried. It was loud now. Loud, hard crying.

Elroy Berdahl remained quiet. He kept fishing. He worked his line patiently, squinting out at his red-and-white bobber on the Rainy River. His eyes were flat and impassive.

"Ain't biting," he said.

Then, after a time, the old man pulled in his line and turned the boat back toward Minnesota.

That last night we had dinner together and I went to bed early, and in the morning Elroy fixed breakfast for me. When I told him I'd be leaving, the old man nodded as if he already knew.

Later in the morning, I finished packing. But by then, the old man had disappeared. About noon, when I took my suitcase out to the car, I noticed that his old black pickup truck was no longer parked in front of the house. I went inside and waited for a while, but I felt a bone certainty that he wouldn't be back. I washed up the breakfast dishes, got into the car, and drove south toward home.

The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again.

I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war. ■