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Hardboiled Travels with Bill Bartram

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The white guy needed a guide. Maybe he also needed a friend. "Into the upper reaches of the St. Johns River," he said. "I have a trunk waiting for me." He'd tied his skinny horse outside my cabin, and now he stood by my table wearing leather pants, his hands crammed into the pockets. His face was wide and white as the moon. But he had a strong chin.

"You mean the *Welaka* River?" I said. "How far?"

"We all face disappointments," he said. "But let us rely on Providence for – "

"Don't screw with me, white guy," I said. "How far?"

"The name is Bill Bartram," he said, "and my trunk is at the southern end of Lake George."

"An imperialist toponym."

He smiled. "The common-place epithet 'untutored savage'" is improperly applied in your case."

I leaned back in my chair. "Get another guide. I don't work with fools."

He laughed. "If I may be so bold, what happened to your ears?"

I thought about breaking his nose, but I told him, "I screwed my dad's new wife. What's it to you?"

"You fornicated with one of his maidens?"

"She was no maiden. Her name was Hachi."

"And so your father cut off your ears?" He looked pleased.

"Him and my brothers," I said. "It happens."

"It does? This is what you people do?"

"*You people?*" I thought about that soft spot where even the strongest chin crumbles. "Yeah, it's what *we people* do. Screw a man's wife. Get your ears cut off. It's the law."

He pulled a leather notebook from one of his pockets and scribbled in it with a pencil.

"Get out of my cabin," I said.

He eyed me over the notebook. "If I may be bold, why don't you wear a hat?"

"Out," I said. "Now."

That should have been it. I'd seen white guys like him before – guys who'd ridden skinny horses from the north or come on ships with maps or deeds, as if scraps of paper could fan them cool when the fever struck or they could make the paper into rafts and paddle away when the alligators got the scent of white meat hanging from their ribs. People kept sending these guys to my cabin. *See Mico*, they told them. *See the man with no ears*. *Mico will do anything at all. He'll even screw his own dad's wife – he's that crazy – no matter that Hachi came to him bruised and full of desire, no matter that he'd loved her since he'd known the word love, long before his dad should've thought about her that way. Go talk to*

Mico. Mico might even be crazy enough to take a white man upriver in fever season.

I told all the white guys the same as I told this Bill Bartram. *Out of my cabin. Now.*

But the morning after Bill Bartram knocked, my brothers Nikosi and Thakee came to visit. They gave me the look of men who never would screw Dad's wife no matter if she breathed on their necks the way she could, and Nikosi said, "This white guy's going to do it. Goddamned fool. He's going upriver alone."

"Not very far," I said. "He looks dumb. I give him a couple of miles before he sickens or capsizes. We can pick up what's left of him at the river mouth."

"That's the problem," Thakee said. "This one can't die."

"Anyone can die," I said. "I almost bled out when you and Dad cut me."

"Last week, the Safkas hit two of the trading houses," Nikosi said. "Stripped them and burned them. Killed three traders."

I laughed. Shouldn't have, but did. Dad had made a deal with the white guys. They called it *mutual respect*, but it meant the white guys took whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, and we would respect them by letting them do it. In return, the white guys gave Dad food and drink and now and then a gun that had gotten too wet or rusty to shoot. The Safkas knew it was a coward deal and so they broke it.

"What's this got to do with the new white guy?" I said.

"The Safkas say they'll kill anyone new who goes upriver," Nikosi said.

"So let them kill him."

Nikosi sighed. "The traders have warned Dad that if anyone else dies, all deals are off. They've already made Dad pay them for what the Safkas stole. If it

happens again, the traders will hit back, and they'll come for Dad first."

I sighed back. "So let them – " But I stopped when I looked at Thakee. He had a knife on his belt, and I knew what he could do with it. Instead, I said to Nikosi, "Take the guy upriver yourself."

Nikosi said, "If you do it, we let you back in the family. Within limits."

He wore no knife. I could probably break *his* nose before Thakee killed me. I said, "What makes you think I want back in the family?"

"It's got to be lonely here," Nikosi said.

Everywhere was lonely unless I was with Hachi, but I said, "Do I get back my ears? Do you sew them back on? Do you give them to me so I can carry them around in a pouch?"

"No one's to blame for that but you," he said.

I laughed at him. "What happens if I say no?"

Thakee said, "There's more of you that we can cut off." He held his hands across his belly, the most peaceful-looking pose you could imagine, though if he fanned his fingers he would touch the knife hilt.

I went to him and stood belly-to-belly. I stared at his eyes. If I grabbed for the knife, he would get it first. If I kneed him in the gut, he would still get the knife first. I said, "Tell Dad I'll think about it."

Nikosi said, "Dad doesn't know we're here. He would be furious if he found out."

"He's a fool," I said.

Thakee's fingers drifted toward the knife.

"I know," I said, "and *you're* truly your father's son" – and I backed away.

That afternoon, I rode twenty miles to the mouth of the river. I figured Bill Bartram's skinny horse would break down or need a rest, or it would drown in one of the creeks or marshes. I figured even if

the horse made it the man wouldn't – he would fall off and break his back or get lost among the dunes. I figured I would find him alive or dead before mile-ten.

Instead, I saw one of the Safka cousins, and I chased him, wondering if he'd already caught and killed Bill Bartram, and he shot at me with a musket, and, when I shot back, he disappeared into a pine forest. So I kept on toward the river wondering who I would find if anyone.

That evening, as the sun set, I came to the dock, and a big sailboat was casting off its lines and drifting out to the open water. Bill Bartram stood on the deck talking with two other white guys. Four slaves picked up oars and rowed the boat out from the bank.

I jumped off my horse and ran onto the dock.

The slaves ignored me.

The other two white guys did too.

But Bill Bartram waved at me and spoke to the others, and then the slaves steered the boat back to the dock. When one of them threw a line around a piling, Bill Bartram said, "A happy coincidence. What news?"

"I changed my mind," I said.

We spent the night anchored in the open water. I stayed awake late, listening for the Safkas but, hearing nothing, fell asleep until the first light, when the slaves hoisted the sails and we started upriver. I watched the shore for movement, watched the water in front and behind for canoes. The slaves trimmed the sails, then stretched on the deck and closed their eyes. The boat owners sat in the stern, one steering and now and then glaring at me and saying something to the other about Charles M'Gee – one of the traders the Safkas killed – and the other watching the sails and now and then yelling at the slaves to *wake the hell up* and fix a line or

set a rod to troll for fish. Bill Bartram took a drawing pad and pencil from a bag and drew a picture of the underbelly of a softshell turtle.

I asked, "You a trader?"

For a long time, he said nothing. Then, "Botanist."

"*Right*," I said. "What's in the trunk that you're going after?"

He drew one of the turtle's webbed forefeet, said nothing.

"Setting up a new trading post, are you, then?" I asked.

He drew a fifth toe on the foot.

"Uh-uh," I said. "That last toe should look like a claw."

He touched his pencil to his lips and smiled. "Of course." He licked a finger and rubbed out the toe. He eyed me like he might draw me next. He said, "I'm travelling upriver because I'm impelled by a restless spirit of curiosity." When I gave him a don't-be-a-jerk look, he added, "My chief happiness consists in the pursuit of new productions of nature."

"*New productions?*" I said.

"Especially the beautiful ones," he said.

"You mean *chicks?*"

"Pardon me?"

"You know, *babes? Hotties?*"

He gave me a blank stare.

I tried again. "Indian maidens?"

"I *like* Indian maidens."

"I'm sure you do, Bill."

"When I was in Georgia I engaged in delicious sports with the wanton nymphs."

"*Delicious*, huh? Are you one of those white guys who come here to exploit the *natural productions?*" I figured if I threw him overboard and drowned him, I could swim upwind to the bank and escape the boat owners.

He grinned. "When the nymphs presented their little baskets, they were too enticing for a hearty young man to abstain."

Or I could stab him with his drawing pencil.

He stared at me as if he saw the violence in my eyes, but he said, "I imagine that if you covered those ears with a hat, the nymphs would find you irresistible."

Then the sound of a gunshot in the scrub brush on the closer bank stung the air, and a musket ball punched a hole in the sail above Bill Bartram's head. A second gun fired, and the ball whistled past.

The boat owners and slaves dove behind the gunnel. I scrambled across the deck, got my musket, and stared into the brush looking for the glint of gunmetal. Bill Bartram just set down his pencil, stuck a finger into the hole in the sail as if measuring it, and said, "Hunters?" Then he picked up his pencil and went to work on the turtle again.

"Get down," I shouted, and I shot into the brush.

But he kept drawing, and one of the men in the back reached up to the tiller, tacked the boat, and steered toward the middle of the river.

I reloaded and shot once more at the bank, but the Safkas were gone, and so I sat by Bill Bartram and said, "You trying to die?"

He sketched the third toe on the other forefoot and said, "I'm trying only to discover and introduce into my native country some original productions of nature."

That night, we landed on a sand island and pitched our tents under the oaks, palms, and sweet bays. While the others slept, I watched the moon rise over the water and listened to the shadows. The Safkas knew how to move *between* sounds and if a raccoon in the underbrush distracted you or you dreamed for a

moment, they would be beside you with knives at your throat. So, long after midnight, when Hachi came to me in my thoughts and breathed on my neck the way she sometimes did when I was awake in the dark, I told her to go away – back to my dad's arms – because she'd already cost me my ears and, if I let her stay with me even in my imagination, she might cost me my head too. When tears glazed my eyes, I shook them away because a blind man dies as fast as a dreaming one.

Then a voice behind me said, "What news?" as gentle as a breath on the neck. I jumped and if I'd had my finger on the trigger I would've shot. Instead, Bill Bartram sat down on the sand beside me. "The stings of mosquitoes make for a poor repose," he said.

I caught my breath and said, "Get used to it."

He was carrying his notebook and pencil again. He asked, "What does your name mean, Mico?"

I wished he would go back into his tent. "Chief," I said. "It means *Chief*."

"They cut off the ears of a chief?"

"I'm not *the* chief. My dad is. They call me Mico as a joke. I'm third son but I don't act like it. They say I'm chief because I'll never be chief. Not unless my brothers die."

"Not even then, I would expect," he said. "Not after you fornicated with your father's wife."

"A girl my own age," I said. "We were both fourteen. We were in love."

He opened his notebook but closed it again without writing. "I'm sorry," he said.

"No big loss."

"Other than your ears."

"Right."

"What happened to the girl?"

"She's still with my dad. He let her keep her ears."

"Then he isn't *all* bad?"

"Who wants to be married to a girl with no ears?"

"Right," he said, and for a while we stared at the light of the moon on the river. When a breeze made the water surface shiver, he said, "It's hard to live in the shadow of a big man."

"You're telling me," I said.

The next day, the wind blew from the north, and we kept to the middle of the river where the Safkas had little chance of shooting us. The boat owners steered and talked and passed a bottle between them. The slaves stretched on the deck except when a sail needed trimming or one of the owners yelled a drunken order. I kept to myself and wondered if the Safkas were tracking our movement from the riverbank and then if my brothers had told Hachi that they were trying to bring me home and, if they had, what she thought about it.

We reached the Cowford Ferry early in the afternoon, and the boat owners stumbled onto the dock and up toward the houses. Bill Bartram carried his bags to shore, asked me to stay with them, and walked to the trading post. Twenty minutes later, carrying a new musket and a pack of fishing tackle and gun powder, he came back with the trader who ran the post. The man showed him a little sailboat that he'd tied up in the marsh grasses, and Bill Bartram said it would do and paid him in coin.

I saw nothing of the Safkas but I figured they were near, watching and waiting for us to leave the settlement. "We should spend the night here," I said. "If we leave tomorrow morning, we can reach the Marshall plantation before dark."

But Bill Bartram looked at the hot blue sky and said, "The breeze is freshening."

He climbed into the boat, hoisted the little sail, and said, "How glorious the day."

"Tonight might be a lot less glorious," I said, and I climbed in too.

But he was right – the wind blew stiff from the north, filling the little sail, and we planed southward across the water. I cradled my gun anyway and kept close watch whenever we approached the banks. For the first two hours we saw no one else on the river. We passed little plantations, then long stretches of scrub and pine forest. Then, two canoes set out from under a cluster of trees on the far bank. I loaded my gun and sighted it on them.

Bill Bartram eyed me, then looked up at the sky and watched a pair of brown pelicans hanging in the air. He said, "If you shoot the sea fowl, we will have a fine meal this evening."

I squinted at the canoes. They followed us, but I couldn't tell if the Safkas were in them. "Pelican tastes like rotten crabs," I said. Then the wind freshened again, and we left the canoes behind.

We stopped late in the afternoon as a storm blew in. We took the sail from the boat and stretched it over an oak that had fallen in a thicket behind a dune, and as the rain came hard and thunder shook the trees, Bill Bartram wrote notes about the ferns that were growing around our shelter. When a gust came over the dune and rain whipped and battered us, I pulled the sail down and lashed it. Bill Bartram just kept writing and said, "How blessed are such hours as these."

"That could become annoying," I said.

When, after an hour, the rain stopped and the clouds cleared, the sun was almost down. I went to the river to try to catch fish for our dinner, but as soon as I had set the lines, a gunshot cracked the air by our shelter. I grabbed my gun and ran toward it.

As I came over the dune, Bill Bartram grinned at me. He held his musket in one hand and a dead turkey-cock in the other. "We shall eat," he said.

"I shall shoot *you* if you scare me that way again," I said.

"Ha ha," he said.

But then a man stepped out of the thicket. One of the Safka cousins – a tall, honest-faced man who you might trust if his name wasn't Safka. He also carried a musket, and he aimed it at Bill Bartram's chest. So I aimed my gun at *him*.

Bill Bartram glanced from me to the Safka cousin, as if he couldn't believe his good luck. He greeted the new man. "It's well, brother," he said, and then looked at me again. "Surely we have meat enough for three."

The Safka cousin fingered the trigger on his gun, but I let him see me fingering the trigger on mine, and so he lowered the barrel and Bill Bartram led him to our camp. He asked the Safka cousin for his gun, and the man wouldn't give it to him until I aimed mine at his head. He gave it up then, and I smirked at him until Bill Bartram asked for mine, too.

I said, "My gun goes where I go."

He held out his hand and said, "Our situation is like that of the primitive state of man, peaceable, contented and sociable. The simple and necessary calls of nature being satisfied, we are all together as brethren of one family."

"You're kidding, right?" I said.

He just stared at me.

I glanced at the Safka cousin, and he shrugged, so I gave Bill Bartram my gun, too, and he put it, his own, and the Safka cousin's under the sail, where the ground was dry. But as we built a fire to cook the turkey, I stayed between our guest and the weapons.

"What is your name?" Bill Bartram asked the Safka cousin as he pulled feathers from the bird.

The man looked at me and I nodded.

"They call me Matta Safka," he said.

"*Matta* means *Serpent*," I said.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Matta," Bill Bartram said.

While the turkey was cooking, he pulled a bottle of brandy and three cups from one of his bags. "Would you care for a drink?" he asked me, and when I said I would, he asked the Safka cousin, "And you, Mr. Matta?" He said he would too.

Bill Bartram poured the drinks and we downed them. He said, "A dram should never be left in solitude," and he poured another. Then he poured a third. After the fifth, he began reciting plant and animal names in Latin – "*Tantalus pictus. Dionaea muscipula. Hydrangea quercifolia. Arundo gigantea. Cacalia heterophylla. . . .*" Then he tried to teach the Safka cousin a song about a Cherokee maiden who ate strawberries.

I got up from the fire and went into the sail shelter. I checked the guns. Bill Bartram's was empty after the shot that killed the turkey-cock. The Safka cousin's was loaded, so I took out the ball and powder. I made sure my musket was set to shoot, then left it and the other guns and went back outside.

Now Bill Bartram and the Safka cousin were sitting side-by-side, talking with each other like old friends. The Safka cousin held a green berry between his thumb and forefinger and was encouraging Bill Bartram to squeeze it into his drink.

"It is good?" Bill Bartram asked.

The Safka cousin nodded. "Sweet."

The berry looked like a tiny green apple. I knew that berry. It came from the manchineel tree and its poison was worse than a rattlesnake bite. The Safkas often

carried the berries, looking for the right chance.

"All right then," Bill Bartram said, and he took the berry from the Safka cousin and squeezed its juice into his cup. The juice fizzed in the brandy. Bill Bartram laughed and said, "Gracious."

The Safka cousin motioned him to drink, and Bill Bartram lifted his cup to his lips.

And stopped.

He sniffed the cup.

He said, "*Hippomane mancinella*." He sniffed again. "*Mancinella* being a cognate of the Spanish *manzana*, where the plant is also known as *la manzana de la muerte*, or the apple of death." He looked at the Safka cousin. "It may well be the source of the poison apple in the German tale of Snow White, which you may or may not know." Then he glanced at me, though I didn't think he'd even noticed me leaving the fire. "May I ask for your assistance in restraining Mr. Matta?"

So I held the Safka cousin, and Bill Bartram, after sniffing the drink once more, forced the cup into the cousin's lips and poured the brandy into his mouth.

The man spit it out but must have swallowed some because when he tried to stand he collapsed and writhed by the fire like the snake he was. Bill Bartram watched him as intently as he'd studied the ferns in our shelter when the storm came, and the Safka cousin's throat swelled until he couldn't breathe and he choked on his own flesh.

"Our guest seems unwell," Bill Bartram said.

I said, "Fever's bad in these parts. Comes on fast."

Bill Bartram asked, "Is there nothing one can do?"

"Nothing," I said.

So he pulled out his notebook and took notes on the dying man. When the Safka

cousin stopped moving, Bill Bartram said, "Truly a serpent in the garden." Then he picked up a stick and prodded the cooking turkey. Oil dripped from the bird and made the embers under it hiss and flare. "Shall we eat?" he asked.

After dinner, we dragged the Safka cousin over the dune and dumped him in the water. The moon cast a glaze on his skin as the current pulled his body downriver.

So we went back over the dune and crawled under the shelter of the sail. Bill Bartram said his prayers, closed his eyes, and soon was muttering in his sleep. I stayed awake and listened to the night because where there's one Safka there's always another, but I heard only the mosquitoes and then an armadillo in the brush and later a possum screeching the way they do, whether in danger or in sex.

In the morning, we ate the rest of the turkey, hoisted the sail, and shoved the boat into the river. But the wind had broken overnight, and we drifted downriver on the slow current until we lowered the sail again and started paddling. The morning was hot, and before we made a half mile up from our campsite, Bill Bartram took off his shirt and his leather pants, grinned at me, and kept paddling. That's when we smelled death. The sour acid got in my nose and mouth and clawed at the inside of my throat like it would live there, and, sure enough, a hundred yards upriver, we saw Matta Safka's body in the shallows off the close bank, his belly bloating, his face fat.

"Goddamn," I said.

"Did he swim upriver?" Bill Bartram said.

"Dragged," I said.

Bill Bartram wanted to look, but I said, "No" – I knew what the body meant, and I

paddled hard for the middle of the river and yelled at him to do the same.

"No," he said too, "I wish to inquire into the processes that –" But two Safkas stepped out of the brush and fired muskets at us, so Bill Bartram paddled and I paddled, and lead balls skipped across the water and, after the Safkas reloaded, splintered the gunnel inches from where Bill Bartram sat. "How quickly is the fluttering scene changed," he said.

"They don't like you, white guy," I said. "We should turn back."

But he steered the boat upriver and said, "I see that the exercise of arms originates from the same motives in the wild red men of America as it did in the renowned Greeks and Romans."

I glanced back at the Safka cousins. They were reloading again. "Yeah? And what motives are those?"

"Not a ferocious desire of shedding blood."

"I wouldn't be so sure," I said.

"No," he said, "your martial prowess proceeds from the more magnanimous intentions of uniting Indian nations under a universal commonwealth absent of intruders."

"You might have something there," I said.

Then, as the Safka cousins shot at us again, he started reciting Latin, as if comforting himself – "*Platanus occidentalis. Liriodendron tulipifera. Populus heterophylla. Laurus sassafras. Laurus Barbonia. Laurus benzoin. Betula lenta. Salix fluvialis . . .*"

We paddled around a bend in the river, and the gunfire stopped and the still air seemed to clench with silence. The sun shone hot and hotter, and we paddled into the heat, keeping at it until midmorning. Then a breeze rippled the water ahead of us, but, by the time we paddled to it, it was gone. We hoisted the sail anyway,

and when the next breeze rippled we chased it and it drew us upriver for fifty yards or so before it died too. For the rest of the morning and the early afternoon, we chased breezes like that until a gentle wind filled in, and we set down our paddles and rested. As we sailed past the Marshall plantation, where slaves worked in the indigo fields, the wind blew from behind, and we stayed in the middle water. I watched the banks for the Safkas, but if they were watching us too they were waiting for us to make a mistake.

That evening, the coquina walls and wooden tower of Fort Picolata rose in the distance, and I said, "We can spend a safe night."

Bill Bartram agreed but, he said, only because he might "gain intelligence" from the soldiers.

"I don't know what you'll gain," I said, "but you might save your life."

"Ha ha," he said with that smile.

But when we landed, we found the fort abandoned, the gate ripped from its hinges, vines growing on the walls. Bill Bartram climbed the bank, went inside, and called, "Hallo!"

The walls absorbed the sound.

"This isn't good," I said. I glanced at the upper walls and into the dark doorways leading into the barrack rooms. I kept my finger on the trigger of my gun. "We should get out of here."

But a skinny white guy, barefoot, in ripped pants and a ragged yellow shirt, staggered out of one of the dark doorways, squinted at the setting sun as if it hurt him and squinted at us the same. He tilted toward us and shouted, "Out! Out! Out!"

I could have shot him, but Bill Bartram raised his eyebrows and asked, "What news?"

The man stopped short. "Disturbances!" he said. "Alarms and

depredations! Malice! Rapine, fire, and massacre!”

“Very well,” Bill Bartram said. “We will spend the night here.”

“No, no!” the ragged man said, “Go! Get out – out – out!” and he waved at Bill Bartram like he was a fly.

“Mico, will you help with the bags?” Bill Bartram said, and we carried our supplies up from the boat as the ragged man flitted and fluttered around us warning us to go. We put our belongings in an empty room and came back outside and built a fire.

“No! No! No!” the man shouted as the first smoke curled into the air above the fort walls. When I held my musket on him to keep him from stamping out the flames, he ran away and clambered up onto the battlements.

So Bill Bartram and I went out to the river with fishing tackle, dug grubs from the mud, and set our lines, and the ragged man paced on the battlements shouting nonsense at us. When we’d caught enough fish for dinner and breakfast the next morning, we went back to the fort to roast it over the fire.

The ragged man climbed down and, as we ate, disappeared into his room, came back with a bearskin, and laid it by the fire. He lit a clay pipe, sat on the skin, smoked, and watched us like we were doing something wicked.

“This is a fine repast,” Bill Bartram told him. “We would be pleased if you partook of it.”

Without a word, the man took a roasted fish, tore the flesh with his fingers, and stuffed it in his mouth. Then he took a second fish.

The food seemed to ease his craziness, and he went back into his room, returned with a jug of honey and water, and filled our cups.

Bill Bartram drank and said, “A very agreeable liquor,” then got his bottle of brandy and poured it into our cups. “Strengthened and made more agreeable,” he said.

The brandy eased the ragged man some more, and he started to talk sensibly. The Safka family had been raiding settlements upriver from the fort, he said. They’d plundered the upper store of the closest trading post and burned a house, killing two families who were hiding inside. He said he had been a trader himself in better times and had stayed at the fort when the soldiers left for St. Augustine. He’d been sleeping in the dark rooms, eating his food raw to keep from flagging his presence with a cooking fire. “Now I’ll be leaving, too,” he said, “if we make it through the night. It’s no longer safe here.” He glared at Bill Bartram and me.

“What news of the post at Lake George?” Bill Bartram asked.

“Still there, last I heard,” the man said, “but no one’s stupid enough to try to reach it with the latest troubles.”

“You should listen to the man, white guy,” I said.

“We leave for the post at first light,” Bill Bartram said.

“What’s in that chest of yours that you want to reach it so bad?” I asked. “Gold? Guns?”

“Prizes more valuable,” he said.

When the fire crumbled into embers and the moon and stars hung bright in the sky, we heard only the sound of insects and frogs in the woods around the fort. Around midnight, the ragged man went into his room, Bill Bartram went into ours, and I set my sleeping roll by the door so the Safkas would need to get past me. But through the rest of the night no one bothered us, though in the morning, an hour before the sun rose, I heard the

ragged man mumbling in the courtyard. When Bill Bartram and I came out, he was gone and he'd stolen a cooking pot that we'd left on the dead coals.

That day, the wind blew strong again, and we covered most of the distance to Lake George. Other than Bill Bartram never shutting up about "sublime enchanting scenes" and "the supreme blessings of nature," we glided peacefully upriver, and I would have thought that the Safkas had given up if I hadn't known them better. When we passed a settlement where eight or ten Indian families were living, Bill Bartram steered us close. Naked kids were wading in the shallows, and Bill Bartram laughed and yelled, "Woo-hoo!" until the younger kids screamed and ran to some old women who were hoeing corn on the upper bank. The older kids stood and stared at us, and I thought they might swim to our boat, pull Bill Bartram into the water, and hold his head under.

I said, "You need to know when to shut up, white guy."

"Ha ha," he said, and yelled again – "Woo-hoo!"

When the wind dropped in the afternoon, we stopped at Mount Royal, an old burial mound, though only a mile of river and the fifteen-mile length of the lake separated us from the post and the chest. Palms and live oaks grew around the base of the mound, and an orange grove stood on one side and a grove of laurel magnolias on the other. The air smelled of orange blossoms and river mud, so when Bill Bartram said, "This is a scene of terrestrial happiness," I had to admit it.

We set up camp next to a thicket, and he wandered off to draw pictures. I kept an eye on him for a while to make sure he stayed out of trouble, though I figured if

the Safkas came for him they would wait until dark. When he settled down to sketch a wild-lime tree, I took my musket into the laurels to see if I could shoot some dinner. The air buzzed with flies and locusts, but I saw no deer and no birds worth eating, and I was heading back to the camp, thinking I would try my luck with the fishing tackle, when a branch cracked in the thicket. The Safkas knew better than to make noise, but I crept in close from behind and saw that this one was only a boy. Still, he had a gun and he was aiming it at Bill Bartram who was down on his hands and knees sniffing the ground by the trunk of the wild-lime. I could take off the back of the boy's head with a musket ball, but a kid is a kid, even if he is a Safka, so I whispered, "Hey, son," and when he spun, I smashed him between the eyes with my gun butt.

I carried him into the camp, and by the time he woke up I had bound and gagged him. Bill Bartram finished his sketch, and when he came back he hardly glanced at the boy, though he said, "I see we have another dinner guest," and he put his drawing pad into his bag.

"Unless I catch some fish, we're *skipping* dinner," I said.

"I fancy a ragout," he said, and he nodded back at the wild-lime.

Two squirrels moved across the ground in the shade of the tree.

"You're a funny guy," I said.

Ten minutes later, as I skinned the squirrels, Bill Bartram took the gag off the boy, looked at him nose-to-nose, and asked, "What news?"

I'd seen one of the Safka cousins lash out and bite a man on the face for getting so close, but the boy just stared at Bill Bartram and let out a long, loud screech.

I grabbed my gun and threatened to brain him if he kept making noise, and when he shut up, I said to Bill Bartram, "If

the other Safkas didn't know where we are already, they do now." I gagged the boy again.

I kept my gun on my lap as we ate. Between bites, Bill Bartram took out his brandy, drank from the bottle, and handed it to me. He insisted that we feed the boy, but when he lowered the gag and forked a chunk of meat into the boy's mouth the kid spat it back in his face, so he put the gag back, took another swig of brandy, and said, "Aside from venison, and young raccoons, which are excellent meat, squirrels are nature's finest repast." But he said it without the cheer I was getting used to.

"Don't take the kid too hard," I told him. "The Safkas are mean ones. The first thing their babies do when they're born is bite their mothers."

He stared gloomily at the kid and said, "It cannot be denied, however, that the moral principle that directs you people to virtuous and praiseworthy actions is natural. You are just, honest, liberal, and hospitable to strangers, considerate, loving and affectionate, industrious, frugal, charitable, and forbearing." As if saying it would make it so.

"Yeah, we're goddamned saints," I said.

He stared at me unhappily.

"Some of us are better, some worse," I said.

He swigged from his bottle and for the first time looked bitter. He said, "I'm being instructed on moral principles by a man with no ears?"

"Go to hell, white guy."

He handed me the bottle. When I drank, he said, "Don't disillusion me. Everything I am depends on who you are."

So we passed the bottle back and forth and we got good and drunk. We drank until the bottle was empty, and then he

stared into the glass neck with one eye like it was a telescope and said, "I'll never live up to my dad's expectations."

"Don't I know it," I said.

"Botanist. Horticulturalist. You know what Linnaeus calls him?" He belched. "The 'greatest.' Linnaeus calls *my* dad the 'greatest.' What does that make me?"

"Greatest what?" I said. "You know what my dad is? Chief of nations." I belched too. "Greatest of the great chiefs. What does that leave for me? Little Mico. The joke. You know how great my dad is? You know what he can *do*?"

"Sure, I know," Bill Bartram said. "He can say, *Go down to Florida and poke around a little. Leave the real botanizing to me. Leave the horticulturing to me.*"

"That's right," I said, "and when you fall in love, he can say, *That girl is mine. Mine because I'm the greatest. The greatest great chief.* And Hachi will go to him because she has no choice, and if you don't like it – if you meet Hachi for just one night, because you deserve that much – he'll cut off your ears. He'll cut off your goddamned ears."

Then we were both crying.

And the Safka boy watched us, wide eyed.

And then I threw up.

So we stretched on the ground by the fire and let the starlight fall on us like rain. And after a while I had no more tears, but Bill Bartram kept talking, like if he stopped he would whirl out into the black night with the stars. He finished whining about his dad and started up on his Father in Heaven, and he seemed to get as happy as a child singing himself to sleep, though he would never sleep, not as long as his words kept coming. He praised the magnolias and grapevines, the live oaks and cypresses. He looked up at the night-silhouette of one of the trees and said, "How majestically stands the

laurel. Its head forms a perfect cone." He belched. "How glorious the palm!"

At some point, the Safka boy got up – legs tied at the ankles, hands bound behind his back, mouth gagged – and hopped away from our campsite and into the woods.

Maybe because I'd emptied my belly of the brandy, I straightened up enough to remember the danger that surrounded us, and I tried to quiet Bill Bartram.

But he called out to the dead men who were buried in the mound, "Ye vigilant and faithful servants of the Most High! ye who worship the Creator morning, noon, and eve, in simplicity of heart! I haste to join in the universal anthem."

"Calm down," I said.

He tried to take my hand in his. "My heart and voice unite with yours, in sincere homage to the great Creator, the universal Sovereign."

"I mean it," I said. "Shush!"

He looked at the sky, said, "O sovereign Lord! since it has pleased thee to endow man with power and pre-eminence here on earth, and establish his domain over all creatures, may we look up to thee, that our understanding may be illuminated with wisdom."

"Will you shut the hell up?" I said.

The Safkas could have slaughtered us that night if they'd wanted to. Maybe the boy told them I'd spared his life and so they decided to spare ours. Or maybe he understood enough of what Bill Bartram said to convince them that he was less of a danger than the traders – that he would probably drown or die of fever without their help – though I figured his way of thinking might take as much of our land and kill us just as hard as the trappers, soldiers, and invading settlers.

In the morning, I woke with a bad headache. Bill Bartram was sitting by the

dead coals of the fire, picking meat from the skin of the squirrels, licking his fingers. "What a blissful, tranquil repose!" he said, and his words hurt the spots behind where my ears should have been. "And now, we enjoy the reanimating appearance of the sun!"

"Shut up!" I said, and my own words hurt too.

Then, a gunshot rang out on the other side of the stand of laurel magnolias.

Maybe the Safkas had gotten over whatever kept them away during the night.

Bill Bartram smiled. "Time now admonishes us to rise and be going."

We shoved off into the river and hoisted the sail. For the next half hour, as we moved toward the mouth of Lake George, he talked and talked, as if I'd done something to earn his special abuse. "O thou Creator supreme," he said, gazing at the scattered clouds, "how infinite and incomprehensible thy works! most perfect, and every way astonishing!"

"Shut up," I said again. "Please?"

Then, a small cloud blotted out the sun, and he grinned. "Neither nature nor art could anywhere present a more striking contrast. A sight, on the whole, sublime and pleasing."

"For God's sake, I'm going to throw up again."

By the time that Lake George came into sight, my head was pounding and my belly was cramping. Then, where the river narrowed before opening into the wide water, a dozen of the Safka cousins stepped onto the bank, guns in hand. They watched us approach, and there was no turning back, no hiding. The water under our boat was waist deep, and even if we paddled downriver they would run along the shore and take us.

Bill Bartram looked at them and then at the open lake beyond them. He said, "I

cannot entirely suppress my apprehensions of danger."

"Those are the first smart words I've heard from you this morning," I said.

But he kept his eyes on the lake. "Our vessel at once will diminish to a nutshell on the swelling seas."

"You're worried about a little lake and not the twelve men who want to kill you before you reach it?"

He smiled. "I'm certain that a divine principle of civility guides the red man's moral conduct as it were instinctively. It seems impossible that any of you people act outside of the common high road to virtue."

The Safkas started shooting. Lead balls ripped through the sail and smacked the wooden hull. Bill Bartram gazed at the sky, grinning, as if hoping to see another cloud pass in front of the sun. If the boat steered straight and he survived the Safkas, he could keep staring at the sky as he sailed across the lake and crashed into the post where the traders held his chest.

A musket ball splintered the top of the mast.

"Tell me," I said, "what's in that chest that's so valuable that you risk everything to come for it?"

He lowered his eyes to mine and laughed again. "If you must know," he said, "dead leaves from the *Andromeda pulverulenta*, the *hydrangea quercifolia*, and the *anona grandiflora*. Pebbles from the riverbed of the Alatomaha. Shagbark from a hickory tree. Beetle carapaces. The shed skin of a pine snake. The divine excretions of nature. I have diverted my time agreeably in excursions picking up –"

"*Excretions!*" I said. "You've been risking our lives for *crap?*"

"Sublime superfluity."

I glared at him.

He smiled at me.

If I stayed another moment in the boat, I would kill him myself. So I gave a shrill and terrible whoop, and I jumped out and ran through the water toward the Safkas.

"Ha ha," Bill Bartram shouted behind me. "You are truly a powerful, hardy, subtle, and intrepid race!"