

Buoy Line

Bruce Tracy

In the early twilight, the sun reflected off of the buoys forcing me to squint to keep the boat moving in the right direction. Even through the glare, I could see that the buoy line had been broken by the wind storm from the last week. Several of the bright orange barricade blocks had broken completely free and were floating solo in a back cove. The buoy line ran the entire width of the lake, preventing boats from floating too close to the dam, but this morning there was a huge hole in it and for the first time in my twenty years of fishing back here, the back part of the lake was open for boats to float into. Facing away from the sun, I looked back to the main part of the lake to see if there were any other boats that could see me, and when I spotted none, I decided to float through the new opening and explore a part of the lake that I had never been in before.

The sun was still not quite up over the mountains and the morning had the fresh feeling of coolness that would soon be replaced by summer heat. After moving past the buoy line, I headed into the cove and made my way around a point into an area of the lake that was completely blocked off by a ridge that came down from the mountain. The water looked immensely fishable, and I turned off the motor and let the boat float freely toward a small beach that sat at the base of the hills.

I cast out a plastic worm and was on a fish before I had even brought in the first cast. As I fought the fish, I neglected to keep track of where I was floating and managed to beach my aluminum boat in the process. It wasn't a big deal. After throwing the fish back in, I jumped out and pulled the boat up onto the hard packed sand, content to fish from the shore in this cove that I had never seen before. The next cast from the shoreline also produced a fish. It was already turning into an epic day ... a broken buoy line, a new fishing cove, and the sun still wasn't burning its summer heat into the morning. In fact, the sun wasn't burning hot at all, it was more a late fall type of day with the air staying crisp in spite of the sunshine.

"That's a nice boat there mister," a voice no more than five feet behind me said. I dropped my pole in the water and spun around, my heart beating wildly. It was just a kid, a young kid, wearing overalls, an old beat up hat, and holding a homemade pole.

I looked around and didn't see another boat. The cove was completely empty with the exception of the two of us. "Ok Tom Sawyer, where did you come from?"

He was still looking at my boat, almost seemed confused by it. Without looking up at me, "Who's Tom Sawyer?"

I reached down and pulled my pole out of the water. "Just someone you reminded me of. So, where did you come from? I don't see another boat out here."

He was now walking around my boat, touching the sides of it and making a low whistle as if approving of what he was looking at. He didn't answer right away, and then looked up at me and gave me a once over. "You sure dress strange mister."

I looked down at myself. I was wearing what I always wore and what most of the other people fishing that morning were probably wearing ... a pair of shorts, a collared fishing shirt, and water proof tennis shoes. "Whatever. You still haven't told me where you came from."

He looked behind him at the hills and shifted his head in that direction indicating that he had come from back there. I squinched my eyes a little. There was nothing in those hills. They rolled on endlessly for a hundred miles until they finally ended in farmlands up north. The boy was now eyeing my fishing pole.

"That's a fancy looking pole mister. How'd you make it?"

"I don't make poles, I buy them." There was a gap here that we weren't crossing. "There's nothing in those hills. Nobody lives in those hills."

"That'd be news to my family." Now the boy was looking at me. "...and to the rest of the folk who live there."

"Kid. Listen to me. I have lived here my entire life and I know these hills about as good as anyone. Nobody lives in those hills except for mountain lions and deer."

"I live there." He was looking as confused as I felt. "Are you alright mister?"

We weren't getting anywhere fast, and I wanted to get back to my fishing. The buoy line would probably be fixed in a day or so, and I would never have access to this back cove again. "Look Sawyer, I am guessing someone dropped you off here to fish for awhile. I get it. You have created a nice little make believe place for yourself back here, but when are they picking you up?"

He was ignoring me and looking past me to the hills. I waited another second or two for a response that wasn't coming. Finally I gave in and looked back over my

shoulder to see what he was looking at. A young girl, younger than the boy, was walking down a dirt trail that I hadn't noticed before. She didn't say anything until she was on the beach with us.

"Why are you here?" he asked the girl.

"Why shouldn't I be here?" she said pulling the pole from his hand and walking down toward the water. The boy chased her down the beach and wrestled the pole out of her hands.

"You need to go on back home. I don't need you taggin' around all of the time."

What kind of an idiot parent would push two kids off of a boat so far away from the boat ramp, especially back here so far away from the main part of the lake? "Guys, you need to break out your cell phones and call your parents to come get you. It's not cool that they left you out here."

Now the girl was giving me a quizzical look, seeming to notice me for the first time. "What are you talking about mister? She walked over to stand directly in front of me. "Who are you?"

"He came on that boat," her brother called over to her. "I saw him bring it in."

"Enough already," I was trying not to get frustrated. I looked down at the little girl in front of me. "Where did you just come from?"

She didn't answer, but her eyes looked up at the path that she had just come down. This was ridiculous. The hill that she was looking at was a low one which would be followed by countless other hills that would run on and on. I wanted to fish, but I was also starting to get curious. "You two stay here and I will be right back. Watch my boat and make sure it doesn't float away."

"You going to head into town mister?" the boy called up to me. "I'll keep eye on the boat."

I started walking, but his sister was not going to let me go alone. "What's your name?" she asked walking at my side step for step.

"Huck Finn."

"Mr. Finn," she asked, "where did you get that strange boat?"

"You ask a lot of questions little girl." I was more interested in answers at that point. The crest of the hill was still twenty yards ahead, but I could already tell something wasn't right. The air wasn't right, the sun wasn't right, even the plants on the

ground weren't right. I picked up the pace and sure enough, at the top of the hill, the world wasn't right.

“What the heck is that?”

“You best be watchin' it mister.” She grabbed my hand and started pulling me toward a town that couldn't possibly exist. “My mother'll wash your mouth out with soap.”

I let myself be pulled by the girl, but I never took my eyes off of the scene in front of me. It was a town sure enough, but not like any town I had ever seen. The road, and there was only one road, was dirt. The buildings were all wood with horses on the streets tied up outside of them. I couldn't see any people, although there were signs that people were there. A chimney was pushing out smoke and I could hear the sound of what sounded like a hammer on an anvil somewhere in the distance. I was either in a time warp, or these people had set up a town in the middle of nowhere with the only way into it coming by way of the lake. Neither possibility was possible. I pulled free from the girl's grasp.

“What year is it?”

She looked up at me and shook her head. “You are very strange mister.”

“Seriously, I need to know. What year is it?”

By now a woman had spied us and had come running out. She was out of breath by the time she had reached us, but she still had the strength to grab the girl's arm and pull her close to her. “Pardon me sir.” There was no friendliness in her voice. She looked down at the girl. “Where have you been and where is your brother?”

“He's fishin' mama.” The girl looked timid for the first time since she had walked down to the beach.

“I am very sorry sir,” she was looking hard at me now, but there was also fear in her eyes. “My kids were supposed to be over the hill fishing.”

“They were.” My heart was racing again. “I was fishing there myself when they showed up. I came over the hill to see the town they were talking about.”

Now the woman looked downright frightened. “The only way to the lake is through our town.” She was slowly backing away from me and then added. “Excuse us sir, but we need to be gettin' back. We have chores that need tendin' to.”

The little girl looked back over her shoulder as she was being dragged away. “It was nice meetin’ you Mr. Finn.”

I was obviously not going to be welcomed here, but without thinking too hard about the consequences, I headed for the back of the nearest house and away from the main road. There were old clothes hanging from lines behind each of the houses, and I slipped between two of them to get a view of the road again. There was an old bar across the street where I could hear a piano and the sounds of men laughing. Down at the end of the road somewhere I could still hear the hammer slamming into an anvil. Closer by, was the voice of the woman who had just left me.

“That’s him,” I heard her call to a man who had come out into the street with her. I thought for a second about making friendly, but the man’s expression told me that I had better take a different approach, so I ran.

There wasn’t any yelling behind me, but when I looked back, I could see that they were walking briskly in my direction. My tennis shoes gave me a decided advantage and when I got to the hill that I had first come over, I looked back again. The two of them had stopped. They almost looked frozen in place on the road.

I quit running and climbed back over the hill. Sawyer was still down fishing in front of my boat, having caught several fish that were on a stringer made out of twine. “Thanks for watching my boat kid.”

“Name’s Jesse sir.” He reached out to shake my hand and I took it. I then pushed the boat away from the hard packed sand and back into the water.

“It’s nice meeting you Jesse,” I answered and with one hand on the back of the boat to keep it from floating away, I reached in and grabbed one of the newer fishing poles and handed it over to him. “Why don’t you try using this one for awhile? I’ll be back later to get it from you.”

“That’s right nice of you sir. Thank you.”

After firing up the engine and moving the boat out of the cove and around the crest of the hill, I realized I probably should have asked him a few more questions. I wasn’t too concerned though, I was already planning a return trip for the following day. As soon as the boat passed by the last buoy, the sun seemed to get hotter.

The buoy line was fixed the next day, but that didn't stop me. I went back to the same spot twice, first by myself and then later with a lifeguard from the lake. There was nothing there. I searched the hills for miles around, but there wasn't a trace of the town, or even some evidence that there might have once been a town there. After my second trip back with the lifeguard in tow, he informed me that I was no longer allowed to go on the other side of the buoy line. He said it was for the safety of the dam, but by the way he was looking at me, it was obvious that he thought I was crazy.

I still fish back by the buoy line all of the time, only now I can't go past it. Just last week while I was fishing there, I saw what looked like a kid standing just over the crest of the hill. The sun was pretty bright, so I couldn't be certain about what I was really seeing, but it sure looked like a kid. When I closed my eyes and looked up again, he was gone.

I looked back to the main part of the lake and when I felt I wouldn't be noticed, I moved my boat over the buoy line for one last time. I beached my boat and hiked up to where I thought I had seen the kid, but when I got to the top of the hill, I saw what I expected to see ... nothing. There were just hills that seemed to go on pretty much forever. I quickly moved back down to my boat, wanting to get back on the right side of the buoy line before the lifeguard spotted me. He had been pretty decent with me the first time, considering my ridiculous story, but I was pretty sure he wouldn't be so lenient if he found me back here again.

As I climbed back into the boat, my heart skipped a beat. On the bench in front of me, there were two fishing poles that weren't there when I had gotten out. One was the pole I had given Jesse, and the other was what looked like the homemade cane pole that he had been using when I first met him. Attached to the cane pole was a hand written scribbled note that said, "Why don't you try using this one for awhile? I'll be back later to get it from you." Looking back up to the crest of the hill, I thought I made out the shape of a boy disappearing behind it, but with sun setting in that direction, I couldn't be sure.