

CREEK HEAVY AND PADDLE LIGHT

By Scott Mason

The rain pounded down, mercilessly. This was... hampering, to say the least. Not because of the rain, but because of my predicament that was exacerbated by the rain. My throat was dry, despite the soaking deluge. This seems counterintuitive, but logic takes a backseat when you're stranded. Strangely enough, the rain, which seemed to be thundering with more intensity somehow, was at least helping to drown out the growing fear that was screaming inside me.

I may have buried the lead a little bit here, which in my line of work is not only unprofessional, it will get you put on the classifieds before the evening edition goes to press. My name is Caleb Reyes. I'm a reporter. The business card says *investigative reporter*. This is open for interpretation. I'm not famous or award winning. If you don't read the *Columbia Courier*, you've certainly never heard of me. I'm ok with that. Right now, I'd just settle for an umbrella and a life raft, forgoing the fame.

Clarity is a fickle bird. I can see this now, which is both ironic and sardonic. When you chase ghosts, well, you end up empty handed, or a ghost yourself. In my case, a stranded ghost. Which, of course, is what I said would happen from the beginning. I told my editor "I'm going to wind up creek heavy and paddle light". That's my way of saying 'up a creek without a paddle'. If only, just once, I'd listened to my own warning.

The snapping of branches and the crashing of breaking glass brought me out of my stupefaction. This is the part where I tell you what is happening, and you don't believe me. I am in an abandoned house, which is currently floating down the swollen Susquehanna River. This doomed ark must have drifted too close to the shore and shaken hands with an oak. It sounded like it took out a window on the other side of the second floor. I would go look, but the staircase that collapsed while I was still on it, also took out a good portion of the hallway floor between me and the sounds. The fact that the house had yet to belly flop into the raging current was the sardonic part. Also, assuredly the only reason I was still alive. Alive, but creek heavy and paddle light.

Let me speak it plain for minute. I got a call from a fairly reliable source that the Morris brothers were holed up in this abandon Victorian house down by the Susquehanna. All indications had been that these two ruffians had skipped Lancaster County altogether and were half way to Mexico, but my source, beyond his strange obsession with cat figurines, was always right. The tricky part was the authorities have never gotten a good picture of them, so unless they were caught with the stolen merchandise, jewels in this case, you had no case against them.

This is a story that I had been on for a while, so I had a personal stake in it. The weather report had said that the river was going to crest by 9pm tomorrow, but the weather report also said the rain was going to have let up by now. It hadn't. Not wanting to get caught in the dregs chasing a couple of no faced criminals and have a bridge wash out on me, I put foot to metal and sped over to where my contact said was an old 'used to be' road that would lead right to the rundown house. Using the word road to describe what I ended up on was up for interpretation as well. I ended up parking a quarter mile down from the house that could be a hideout.

The rain was hopefully drowning out any sounds that I was making as I approached the old abandoned structure. It was also soaking me thoroughly. Consequently, I couldn't hear anything from inside. I wanted to wait a few minutes and scope out the house, see if I saw any movement or could hear anything, but the pounding rain made me want to find a roof and quick. Since I was already soaked to the bone, I chose to wait. A few times I thought I saw movement, slight as it was, between dilapidated curtains. The Susquehanna was roaring not 100 yards from the rundown house, and the muddy swell seemed alive and hungry. Little did I know that this engorged waterway swallowed houses whole.

Finally, I traversed the last 50 feet and cautiously stepped onto the cement patio. The roof overhang provided respite from the drenching rain, and I took a moment to collect my thoughts and wipe my face. Still, I could not tell whether anyone was inside. Knowing what could face me when I slipped through the door clung like chains to my feet, and I could not get them to move. Usually when this sort of paralysis grips me (since this isn't the first time it's happened) I try to envision the epic headline that I would write, post adventure. Nothing was flowing except the bulging river. I opened the door.

The barrel of a 9-millimeter pistol greeted me.

"I was wondering how long you were going to stand out there. Welcome to the party."

I balked. "Whoa, whoa, hang on. I was just... I mean I got stuck. My car, got stuck and I just was looking..."

"Dude, you got no imagination at all."

My eyes finally adjusted to the darker interior, and before me stood one half of the Morris brothers. I didn't see any jewels or a driver's license, but my instinct told me that I was in the thick of it now. Movement behind the man with the gun materialized into another man, grinning and eating a sandwich. Brother number two. I was definitely creek heavy and paddle light now.

"So, what do we have here." The second man flatly chortled. "The prodigal son comin' in from the storm huh? He wants an exclusive?"

Morris brother number one flipped the safety on the gun and lowered it to his side.

“So, obviously we got some talkin’ to do. Better make it quick too because the river is about to give birth to about a million tons of trouble. You-” he pointed the gun at me. “Sit. There.”

I obeyed, scanning the room for something, either to use as a weapon or to help prove that these two were guilty. And wouldn’t you know it, I was still paddle light.

“Hugh, you know there’s only one thing to do here. Regardless of our history, this has to be it brother.”

“Shut up Anthony. Lemme think.”

Just then, the river broke its bank. The sound was like a dinosaur on the prowl. The house shook as the water slammed into the foundation. The brothers looked at each other. Brother number two chuckled and then looked at me. I smiled back, more out of disbelief than humor. That was when I heard the gunshot.

I looked down at my chest, expecting to see a gnarled hole spurting blood. Instead, I saw nothing out of place. I quickly looked at Hugh. He was holding his gun up, smoke curling from the end of the barrel just like a film noir scene. It was pointed at his brother. Anthony let out another chuckle, then crumpled to the floor. Hugh let out a small sigh, shrugged his shoulders, then leveled the gun at me. I expected the worst, but the only sound I heard was the safety being engaged again.

“So, what to talk about? Any ideas?”

“First off, I’ve been wanting to do that for years.”

Hugh laughed. “Well, you know what mom always said. I got the nerves, you got the brains, and Anthony got gyped.”

Sorry. I did it again. That lead got buried pretty deep this time. I’ll be pumping out classifieds for sure. Hugh and Anthony are two parts of a group of three brothers. The Morris brothers. Hugh, Anthony and Caleb. Did I mention I had a personal stake in this? I had changed my name some time ago, for the sole purpose of distancing myself from my crooks for brothers. Fate, another fickle bird, had seen fit to bring them right back to my doorstep. I asked for the story in hopes of chasing these ghosts of my past right out of town and sparing myself the shame and aggravation of dealing with them publicly. Cue the sad violins.

The burgeoning river had begun to invade the house now, bringing back to our minds the more immediate threat. The wood started to groan in protest, as the rushing water carved out its own path. The din was increasing as well, a thick roar that demanded attention.

“Well, we don’t have much time, do we? I suppose you drove out here, right?” Hugh still held the gun, not aiming it at me but ready to strike. I knew my brother. He already had three ideas and the gumption to try any one of them. He got the nerves all right, but he wasn’t without a brain, like Anthony was. Hugh also had a pulse, which Anthony lacked now as well.

"Look brother, we need to leave now. Let's figure out the details later."

"I've already figured them out." Hugh raised the gun again and heard the safety click off. I only had one chance, and then irony showed up. The whole house seemed to rise up all at once, shuddering and shaking. Hugh's attention was forced to turn toward the quaking floor, and I darted toward the archway away from him. As I turned to corner out of the room, a sharp report rose above the raging river and heard a hard *slap* against the wall to my right. Hugh had recovered and fired his pistol. I slipped on the wet floor and tumbled, rolling over and slamming my knee into the bottom step of the stairs. I hopped up and scurried onto the steps, hearing Hugh stomping behind me. Then, the house seemed to explode. Wood and metal wrenched and then failed, as the surging current twisted the structure like a mop being wrung. I was two thirds of the way up the stairs as they all but disintegrated at my feet. I barely limped my way to the top.

I was curious as to why I had not heard another shot from Hugh's pistol. Gathering myself at the top, I turned and looked down. Hugh was standing there. In one hand he still held his gun, and in the other, well, was my life. In my clumsy escape, my car keys and my wallet had fallen out of my pockets.

"So, here it is. My way out. Thanks for the life brother."

"You can't become me. People will figure it out." I was searching for something, anything to say or do.

"Oh, come now. I've read your work. I can fake it for a few months until I sell the jewels. Then I'll quit and move away. Simple." And with that, he walked away and I heard the door slam amidst the raging flood.

There's another part I failed to mention. The Morris brothers were identical triplets. Now you see why I changed my name and got away from my brothers. Buried the lead again. Three strikes and I'm out. So now I have literally become my own ghost. A few minutes later the house broke free and started its fateful journey downriver. I'm about to die and someone is taking over my life, and no one will ever know it. The house is listing sideways and sinking now, as I'm thrown into a wall that is quickly becoming a floor. I am solidly creek heavy and paddle light. My last thought is: "I hope he's a decent writer, or I'll get put on the classifieds for sure."