
RAFT
OF
STARS
A Novel
ANDREW J. GRAFF

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Dedication

For Heidi

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Prologue

To: Fish's Grandpa

Fish had me put this note on your fridge to tell you we are running away.

He says we're going to find his dad. We will mail you money for the sack of food we took from your cupboard, and the jackknife, and the two cups, and the pack of matches. Fish says to tell his mom don't worry. We have my old man's gun and five bullets. We have our bikes and fish poles, and a tarp, and also a pouch of your tobacco, and will send money for that too.

Please tell the sheriff that Fish didn't want to shoot my old man. My old man is dead in my kitchen, on the floor by the table.

From: Dale Breadwin

One

THE BABY TURTLES THE BOYS CARRIED IN THE FRONT OF THEIR shirts were the size of half-dollars. Fish stopped on the asphalt and looked down into his shirt as he crossed the road from the field to the marsh for the fifth time. It was early June and the sun was hot, and the turtles looked bothered and parched as they clawed in a pile. The turtles were *tenacious*, which meant "persisting in existence." That was a word Fish knew from fifth grade.

Fish's friend, Bread, clawed up from the ditch clover, its lazy bees, and caught up with Fish on the road. A redwing blackbird clung to one of last year's dried cattail stalks.

"You know these are snappers we're saving," said Bread. "See them bony shells? We're saving snappers."

The boys feared grown snappers like they feared Bread's old man. If there was one thing that could stop the boys in their tracks, it was the discovery of a full-grown snapper, how the thing reared up and hissed in that way that didn't seem right for a turtle to do. Turtles and dads weren't supposed to rear up and hiss.

Fish looked down into his own shirt and shrugged. "They don't look mean yet," he said.

The asphalt road they stood on was quiet and old and bleached nearly white by the sun. It cut through marshes and drained marshes that had been long ago tilled into cornfields. The rooftops of the town of Claypot rose up from the fields a half mile away. The two sagging roofs of Bread's old man's house and mechanic shop butted up against the fields to the south. Fish hated that house and shop.

"But they'll get mean once they grow up," said Bread.

Fish looked at the turtles again. It didn't seem right to judge them this early in life, the way they were nearly dried up and only just hatched. Poor damn things. That's something his grandfather often said when a calf was born a runt and couldn't eat, or a baby bird had fallen from its nest for the cats to find. The world was full of poor damn things. Sometimes Fish's grandfather looked at Bread with the same kind of pity in his eyes, but then he'd seem to catch himself and say something about how grateful he was for Bread's hard work that day, and how he hoped Bread would be back the next. Fish had seen the same looks of pity in the eyes of other grown-ups

when they got around Bread. He'd seen it in the eyes of the sheriff when he came around, and even the gas station clerk, when Bread trudged up to the counter in his ragged sneakers to buy a candy bar with money Fish's grandpa had given him. There was pity, but also wariness, like they were just waiting for Bread to turn out like his dad, waiting for him to pocket the candy and bolt. Bread was poor, and his dad was mean, but Fish disliked the way grown-ups looked at his friend. He didn't like what it did in his heart, how it made his friendship bear some sort of shame.

"I want to save 'em," said Fish.

Bread nodded and grinned. "Me too," he said.

The boys had been walking their bikes toward Claypot when they found the turtles. The overwintered snappers emerged from a dried culvert ditch—the tracks were evident—but instead of clawing their way through the culvert and into the marsh, they clawed their way into the dry dirt of the tilled-up cornfield. They wouldn't find water if they went that way. And in another week they'd get beaten up by the planters. There were hundreds of them, like little round stones pushed up by a thaw. The boys leaned on their handlebars, watching all the doomed turtles. It had been a good day until then, and doom would ruin it. Before they found the turtles, they sat in the pine trees behind Fish's grandpa's barn, and before that they lit off firecrackers in the barn's silos. Fish loved lighting off firecrackers in silos. The way the air was so dank and still. The way the match flared and the fuse sparked and you covered your ears and squinted your eyes because the darkness was about to become so filled with noise and light. Lighting firecrackers always made Fish feel as if something big was about to happen, big enough to change a regular day. You just had to wait for the fuse, and then the noise and smoke would take you somewhere. And when things got quiet and dark again, you could always light off more firecrackers as long as you had more matches. It was a lot like Fish's friendship with Bread these last three summers he spent at his grandpa's farm. Fish was a fuse and Bread was the match, or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, summer was too tame if you had one without the other. Once school let out, his mom would drive him up from town to drop him off, and Fish's grandpa would be waiting on the porch, and Fish would hug his mom and bolt from the car with his duffel packed for weeks of fields and trees and rivers.

Both boys were covered in cornfield dust up to their armpits from gathering the turtles, and the turtles themselves were white with it, like

they'd been shook up in a bag of frying flour Fish's mom used to batter chicken halves. It was a dry spring. The tractors that dragged the soil smooth last week raised dust clouds that hung in the air for hours. A frigid winter with too much snow, and now a spring without rain. The winter was hard on the wildlife. When what snow there was first melted, the boys found three deer lying dead in the woods beneath a cedar tree, eyes milky and open. It looked as if the animals had grown too tired of the cold and decided to lie down for a while, amazed that a winter so cold could exist even this far north. "Poor damn things," Fish had said, after hesitantly prodding one with a stick to prove death didn't bother him.

On the opposite side of the asphalt road, the ditch met marsh water. The water was cold and dark with silt, and the wet bank seeped into the toes of the boys' shoes as they squatted down to free the snappers. As they lowered each leathery creature into the water, the turtles seemed awakened by it. The way the dust washed away. The suddenness of submersion. The turtles craned their little heads forward and waved their legs and swam away into the silt and water. They were like pigeons taking flight in pairs from the roof of Fish's grandpa's barn, aimless and erratic, surprised.

"Last one," said Fish, holding a kicking turtle over the water. Bread had already emptied his shirt and now washed his hands in the marsh. He sat back on his heels looking very satisfied as Fish freed the baby snapper. If Fish could pray the way his mom prayed, which was without ceasing and for everything, he would say a prayer for these turtles. He felt happy for them, or at least happy with himself, but he worried too. They were so small to be out in the marsh. They were each of them alone out there. Fish couldn't decide whether to admire or mourn them.

"Good luck," he said in a whisper, rubbing his palms together in the water and then looking up at the position of the sun. It was about to sink toward the treetops of Claypot. His smile faded as he saw the town again, saw the rusted tin roof of Bread's old man's house.

"What are you going to say?" asked Fish.

"To the turtles?" Bread asked. The boys watched the surface of the marsh water as if waiting for the tiny heads to pop back up. They never came. After their dry march through the unplanted field, they wanted to stay buried in the silt for a good long while.

"To your dad, I meant," said Fish, and then regretted saying it at all.

Bread looked up from the water. His neck tightened. “Oh,” he said, and looked back at the marsh.

The water’s surface was filled with light. On the banks, last year’s grass lay brown and matted, but a good six inches of new growth poked through. Fish picked a flat blade of marsh grass, ran his fingers against its coarse grain, pretended to be interested in it. Then inspiration struck. There was a chance.

“My grandpa has more work for me to do tomorrow,” said Fish. “You could help again if you want.” He paused and gauged Bread’s reaction, and then he purposefully brightened his voice as if he just came up with what he was really trying to say. “Why don’t you not go home at all? You can come spend the night again. My grandpa can call.”

Bread shook his head. “My old man said to get home,” he said, standing up and swatting dust from the knees of his jeans. “He meant yesterday.”

SOME DAYS THE BOYS MADE A GAME OF DREAMING UP WAYS TO RID Bread of his old man. They sunk the man in the marsh once. Another time they tied him up in raspberry bushes and let black bears get him. They ran him down with countless trucks and tractors, and they once buried him up to his neck in an anthill they found behind the barn. The game was a way of deadening the blows of Bread’s real life. Bread would come out to Fish’s grandpa’s for a few days at a time. He’d arrive with stories about falling down steps or crashing his bike, and his face and neck would get so red with shame that the bruises seemed to fade. Always, though, by the time he left the farm the bruises had more or less yellowed. It wasn’t every time. But it happened.

One evening when Bread spent the night, Fish overheard his grandpa talking with Bread on the porch, asking him how bad it was at home. Bread hardly answered him, until Grandpa offered to go and talk to his old man, which Bread quickly refused. Fish overheard the talk from inside the kitchen where he filled a glass with water. He tiptoed to the porch door and leaned close to the screen.

“He just gets mad,” said Bread. “He’s usually always mad.”

“He drink every night?” asked Grandpa, and after a pause, “He ever mess with them guns when he’s drunk? Hmm.”

Fish could smell the dust in the screen and felt a bad sort of envy about his friend. Fish’s grandpa spoke to Bread as if he were an equal. Fish hadn’t experienced that. Ever since Fish started spending summers at his grandpa’s

farm, he sensed his grandpa was somehow ill at ease around him. His grandpa was strong and gentle and good, but there was a certain distance between them that never allowed them to talk about real things, big things. They could talk easily about baseball players, or truck tires, or what needed doing around the place. But if Fish found himself crying in the hayloft—as he did often enough his first summer out, terrified by his new life without his father in it—he knew he was on his own. So he'd stop crying, finish his chores, wipe his face with his shirt, and stride toward the house to announce his hunger for dinner. It once occurred to Fish that maybe his grandpa's distance was a kindness as well, a lesson from a man to a boy about how not to dwell too much on things. Fish couldn't tell. It made him feel the way he did when he tried not to cry in front of boys at school. It was good not to cry. It was also awful.

"Look here, Dale," said Grandpa. "I don't mean to get in your business. But just so you know how I know, my old man used to push me and my sisters around too."

There was a pause. A heavy june bug attached itself to the screen near Fish's face and nearly caused Fish to reveal his presence. Fish's grandpa stood, reached for his pouch of tobacco.

"And I know how it goes if other people poke around in it, how it can make it all so much worse. So. But if you ever need a place to go, ever, you come right straight here. You run straight through the corn if you got to. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Good."

The three of them sat in the quiet, Fish on one side of the screen and his grandpa and Bread on the porch. The sun was all the way down now, and the fireflies were starting to lift out of the grass and float past the apple trees, speaking silently about whatever it is fireflies have to say to one another.

"None of it means you can't grow up good, Dale, a hell of a lot better than your old man. You're going to be a good one, you and Fischer are both going to be good." He stood now, walked across the porch boards, spat chew over the railing, and adjusted the green fatigue cap that always sat on the back of his head, its stout brim skyward. Fish was pretty sure he got the hat in Korea, but he never asked. It never left his head unless he slept, or