

Up River

A Novel of Attempted Restoration

by
George Ivey

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, incidents, and everything else in this book are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any real person, place, event, or thing from the past, present, or future is entirely coincidental.

Journal Entry from Year Two

I had no idea that trying to do good could make me feel so bad. Have I been too ambitious? Simply naive? It's not like I have some grand plan to save the whole world. Only a tiny piece of it—a small river meandering through a little county, hidden away in these tired, old mountains.

I'll admit the Akwanee isn't much to look at, not at first glance at least. It's narrow enough in places for a kid to throw a rock across it. During a drought, I have a hard time paddling a kayak over its shallow riffles without getting stuck on some rock. After a big rain, it's hopelessly muddy. Maybe it's no wonder that most people pay it no attention, no respect.

If only they would take the time to break through the surface, they would find the river's many little treasures—colorful fish, freshwater mussels, crayfish, turtles, and other creatures.

Of course, that's not all they would find. These waters host a seemingly endless supply of dirt, trash, chemicals, and other pollutants. It's no wonder that a half dozen fish and mussel species are struggling to survive, getting closer to extinction every day.

But problems abound in the world above, too. So many people here suffer from one real hardship or another—poverty, sickness, unemployment, abuse of every possible form of alcohol and drug. Abuse of people, too, and various other crimes. Is it realistic—or even fair—to expect them to put aside their own troubles to try to save some fish too small to eat or an obscure mussel lodged in the rocks and the mud at the bottom of the river?

Probably not. But what about all the others who simply don't care? Rural or urban, rich or poor, smart or undereducated, plenty of them have time or money or good ideas or something else to contribute, but no amount of talk about clean drinking water or protecting God's creation or any other worthy goal seems adequate to catalyze them to action.

For me, though, from the very beginning, I've thought this river was worth saving, even if I didn't know exactly how—and still don't. I've found no magic formula, no recipe, not even a textbook to guide me.

Still, it seems like I'm learning something else that goes beyond the water and the creatures within. There is some message that I can't yet translate. Will I ever figure it out?

I wonder—I worry—if it will turn out just like the trouble with the mills this week. I had found a lot of the pieces, but I didn't put them together in time. If I had, maybe I could have prevented all the trouble that has followed. Instead, everyone in Walnut Flats has blamed me, regardless of the lack of evidence, regardless of my lack of guilt. It's not just back to square one. It's worse. A lot of them actually hate me.

I sat and sulked for hours this afternoon, wanting to forget the whole incident, including that grating version of the Oscar Mayer Bologna song that the mystery protestors sent to the radio station. I needed to hear different music, something with loud guitars and drums and kindred voices of frustration and anger.

I tried several songs, playing them all much too loud, but nothing seemed to fit. Most of the singers complained only of good relationships gone bad, and I didn't need any reminders of my losses on that front, too. I really thought I had finally found the right woman. Well, maybe that's overstating it a bit, but I know it felt different than anyone before. And if things hadn't taken such a sudden turn for the worse with her, too, maybe I could tolerate the rest of it.

I needed to clear my head, at least for a little while, so I decided to go cycling. A few hard miles on the bike would surely break down some of the angst that had built up inside.

I got into my cycling gear and walked my bike out the gravel driveway to the road. As I

sat down to put on my cleated shoes, young Will came running up the road from the bridge.

“Look what I found, Mr. Pete. Seashells!” He opened his little hands and revealed a small collection of Asiatic clam shells—evenly ridged, quarter-sized, a tan shade of yellow. He couldn’t have been happier with his discoveries, and I ached to be six years old again, when life was so simple.

“Actually, those are freshwater mussels, Will, a kind of river clam,” I explained. “This particular kind comes from very far away from here.”

He shook his head vigorously back and forth. “Nope. I found ’em beside the river, right over there.” He pointed to an area downstream of the bridge, as best he could with two handfuls of shells. “That ain’t far at all.”

“Well, you’re right,” I admitted. “But originally, they came from China and other parts of Asia.” That news confused Will considerably, and I quickly dropped whatever intentions I had of teaching him about exotic mussel species, a subject that was so new to me only a year or so before. I tried to keep it simple instead. “It’s like this, Will. Some kinds of clams have always lived in the Akwanee River, but there aren’t many of them left. If you ever find one that looks a lot different than these, let me know.”

“Different how?” he asked.

“You’ll know when you see one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Well, no, I wasn’t so sure, but it was time to ride. I stood up and got on the bike, wobbling back and forth as I snapped my cleats into the pedals. “See you later, Will.”

I glanced back. Will was looking at the shells and lost in his thoughts. He let out a faint goodbye.

I eased down to the bridge and then started up again and out toward the hills.

I rode with my head down.

When I first arrived here, the rural landscape thrilled me, with all its quaint farms, tall trees, and taller mountains. The cows in the roadside pastures would watch me pass, their heads ticking like second hands, while red-tailed hawks and turkey vultures circled above.

Now, though, I see only what’s wrong—litter in the drainage ditches, cows pissing and shitting while cooling themselves in the creeks, shade trees cut from the streambanks, and new home sites full of bare soil waiting to wash away in the next storm. The graceful circling of the vultures only reminds me of all the dead chickens from the poultry houses.

So today I simply watched the pavement roll underneath me, focusing on the steady rhythm of the turning pedals, trying to block out everything else.

After warming up for a few miles, I increased my pace, trying to grind out my frustration with each pedal stroke. I went up into the hills, moving into narrowing coves and steeper ascents. My lungs strained. My legs burned. It felt right.

I turned around at the end of the pavement, shifting gears for the quick return downhill. I gained speed, leaning into the curves, picking my way around the gravel that had washed from each driveway during the big storm a few days before.

I moved effortlessly. It was my brief reward for all the work going up the mountain. It’s what I expect in the rest of my endeavors, too—hard work at the start, and then a chance to coast a while and catch my breath. I didn’t mind the labor up. But it sure felt good to have some downhill for a short while.

The road started to flatten as it returned to the valley floor, but I still had plenty of momentum. As I rounded another curve, a modified school bus from Big Red was pulling out of

an adjoining road to the left, free of its load of fuzzy little chicks. I assume the driver hadn't seen me, but regardless, he moved into the road, soon filling both lanes. Given my sudden run of misfortune, it seemed almost fitting that I should die in a collision with a chicken bus. Death by poultry. Why not?

Hoping to forestall my ultimate fate, I squeezed hard on my brake levers. Then I hit a patch of dirt and gravel, and my back wheel locked up. My bike slid out to the left, and I went down to the right. If the driver saw me fall, he sure didn't bother to stop.

I ended up horizontal, half on the pavement, half on the grass, looking back up the hill. I moved slowly at first, making sure I was still intact, and then checked the bike. Cuts and scrapes on my right arm and leg, a bruised hip, torn jersey and shorts, some scratched paint on the bike frame. It could have been worse. A lot worse.

I rode home slowly, nursing my injuries, trying to figure out how it's all gone so wrong—and whether I can ever make it right.

Chapter 1

In the beams of the headlights, the large wooden sign before me announced, “Welcome to the Home of the Rainbows.”

Years before, a cynical uncle had shared with me his views on rainbows: the only way to see one is to turn your back to the sun, face the storm, and chance to find something good, something surprising. “Even then,” he said, “it’s only an illusion.”

But that’s almost beside the point. It was ten o’clock at night, and the sun had disappeared hours before. At that exact moment, Walnut Flats was really just the Home of the Rain. The storm pounded my little rental car, with sheets of water splashing down heavy and nearly sideways at times.

Fortunately, it didn’t take me long to find my motel in that little town. I splashed through the cold rain and into the lobby, where an old woman sat behind the counter smoking a cigarette and watching a game show. She looked at me briefly, then returned her gaze to the television. I waited politely for a few seconds, but she didn’t get up. When I was finally about to say something, the show went to commercial, and she came over to the counter.

“Even *I* knew the answer to that one,” she declared to me in a husky voice. “How ’bout you?”

I confessed that I hadn’t been paying attention. She squinted and studied me, perhaps perplexed by my lack of interest in the game.

“You ’plyin’ fer that river job?”

“Pardon?”

“Bailey, right?”

“Yes, that’s me. Peter Bailey. How did you know?”

A thin, crooked smile emerged on one side of her mouth, and she handed me a form to fill out. “I’ll say it was a lucky guess.” She found me amusing in some way, but was too polite to say it. Not with words at least. Somehow, though, she seemed to know more about my job prospects than I did.

“So, how many people are being interviewed?” I asked.

“Three or four, all dependin’ on who’s tellin’ the story.”

“Did any local people apply?”

She let out a small chuckle before sighing and answering, “Not a one.”

She handed me a key, and I hauled my bag up to a musty room with a concave bed. I was tired enough, but sleep eluded me. It wasn’t the mattress. I was all nerves. I hadn’t yet laid eyes on the Akwanee River, but I was enamored with the idea of saving it. It was a noble calling, a chance to do something that really mattered.

Akwanee, I whispered to myself. The name seemed mysterious and powerful, but somehow soothing, too. I repeated it over and over in my mind until I finally fell asleep.

END OF SAMPLE