

## VALUABLES

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Honorable Mention, Short Story

### I.

THE MISSIONARY OPENED his hand. Three nails, rusted and bent, lay crossed in his palm leaving orange marks in the creases where fortunes are read. Having saved the nails from a discarded raft, he was now transporting them to another outpost further down the Orinoco River. He urged the couple to examine each one. The woman, having just met the man and in deference to his mission, nodded her appreciation.

The Woman, an American tourist, might have fallen off the cover of the *Lonely Planet Travel Guide*, seeking self-actualization only during her yearly expeditions. Her camera, always carried but rarely used, was protected in her backpack. The two young boys with the Missionary had put down their oars and were gripping the rope connecting the two boats. The Woman watched as the boys focused only on their grasp of the cord; her questions to them dissolved by the absence of a response.

The Woman's Companion believed he was on a fishing trip.

### II.

The Missionary initiated his role as tour guide. "We are lucky today. We do not often find an engine boat on our river. You must be from the States, yes?"

"Are we that obvious?" the Woman smiled but tucked her backpack further under the bench. "And you? I'm surprised to hear English."

"Yes. I have been here six years, from Italy; but these people are so beautiful yet so primitive. I will stay as long as I am needed. The children knew nothing of Christ; they are now children of God."

He spoke to the boys. "Estais ninos de Dios."

They answered without lifting their eyes from the rope. "Si, mi padre."

"They are good boys." The Missionary turned back to the couple, "And you, I am grateful to meet you. You have traveled far to find this beautiful piece of the river."

"We're gonna do some fishing, piranha fishing," the Companion interrupted.

"Yes, piranhas, they are here in the river," the Missionary motioned towards the water and its banks. "The children often swim among them."

Noticing the Woman's reaction, he continued. "It is very rare that the fish attack. They are both travelers and scavengers; they move through unless something gets their attention."

The Companion straightened himself on the bench and then leaned toward the Missionary. "Like what? What would get their attention?"

"I do not know how they choose what is of value. But when they see what they want, they attack, vicious. and then just as quickly swim away."

The Woman studied the river, watched uniform ripples soak into the banks. She reached for her camera. She wanted to frame an image, the feeling of the water movement blotted by predictability. Instead, she focused on the boys, their hands encumbered by fraying rope, her own hands cradling the camera, and the Missionary still grasping the discarded nails. She knew how much of her life was like theirs, driven by obedience and expectations, her apartment walls lined with photographs, vacation trophies to document her understanding of the human condition. The camera reflected insight, perceptions of an enlightened human being, but the lens, diligently obedient and undistracted, was too much like a mirror. Without taking a picture, she put the camera into her backpack.

The Missionary continued speaking, telling the Companion of a life's journey that led him to this place. His words blurring into indifference. The Woman could see only three colors, the gray of the sky and the water both streaked with blue haze and the muted greens of the riverbanks. She felt nothing and it was shocking. The beauty of the river had faded like the young boys.

### III.

The boats, still connected by the disciplined grip of the small boys, passed a village of four huts with a fifth built further out into the water. The Missionary pointed at the hut and watched the reaction of the Companion. "That is where your astronaut, Armstrong, lives."

"No, he can't live out here."

The Missionary smiled at the Companion's response. "A recluse. His success is maybe too great for him. *One small step for a man.*"

"One giant leap for mankind." The Companion agreed, "I guess he couldn't handle it. A man like that, you'd think he'd be stronger."

The Woman turned away to smile. Taking out her camera, she quickly shot a picture of Armstrong's hut, framed alone, and then several more shots with the other four huts in view. Escaping to the isolation, the other worldliness, it made sense. Or was it the reverse? The journey inward. The sky clouded thick without sun, moon or stars. A life's mission hidden beneath or above the Orinoco blue. A reflection caught somewhere in the middle. She wrapped the camera and placed it once again into the backpack.

The Woman offered the two boys a bottle of water. They looked to the Missionary and he nodded. Taking turns they drank and held to the rope until the bottle was emptied. Without speaking they went back to their work, bodies without language.

#### IV.

The two boats stopped at the next village, a cluster of huts lining the riverbank. The Missionary helped the Companion fill yellow plastic containers with gasoline from a rusted barrel floating in the river; spilled oil outlined the water vivid blue in contrast. The Missionary pointed to a collection of cinder block squares, freestanding rooms, built away from the riverbank.

"The Government built those a few years back, but never finished, too hot for people here. Took almost a year to bring the material. After the workers left, the animals were moved into the rooms, but even the chickens won't stay inside."

"What a waste." The Companion stood holding the container of gasoline and his fishing pole.

The Woman stepped away from the Companion. "Yes, what a waste," she agreed. She looked down at his fishing pole and turned towards the village. Huts built into the river on stilts, delicate, simple structures without walls. Nothing to keep in or out. She heard children's voices, their laughter pouring out into the river. Under a thatched roof, two young boys played a game with twigs and stones. Sitting together, they were oblivious to missions and motorboats, indifferent to her presence. She took a picture of their character to frame later and place on her desk.

The Woman turned to look for the Missionary's boys, but their boat was already traveling down the river. Oars in motion, she watched them disappear. With her back to the cinderblocks, she could see the sun stroke the river and simple brown hands, empty and open, move with rhythmic voices.

"Hey, let's go, we're ready." The Companion's voice traveled through the homes. The boys' laughter hushed. The Woman stood silent, her shirt, weathered gray, blended with the cinderblock wall. She waited for the boys' voices to return, but she heard only the start of the boat's motor. Exhaust filled the air.

#### V.

The Companion spoke first. "Do you think anyone has ever touched this exact spot in the river? I might be the first, like Columbus." His hand splashed into the water, "Do you ever think about stuff like that?"

The Woman did not answer; the Companion did not notice. "What do you think the deal is with that preacher? You live out here long enough you get to be just like them. A whole day just to get three nails. Damn, I could teach these people."

"Like what? What are you going to teach them, English? Maybe you could just plant an American flag."

"I'm serious. There's no reason for them to live like this; it's backwards, they are backwards. I could teach them how to make something, something to sell; they could get motorboats."

"Motorboats?"

"It's beautiful here. It just needs to be developed, then they could attract tourists."

"That's what you think they need, more tourists?"

"I'm just saying, I could do some good. I could make a difference."

"Isn't that the problem? Everyone leaves their mark." The Woman reached back and shut off the boat engine. "It's just not always what we think it is. The Government, the Missionary, You, Me. No one just floats through. We take what we need. I take my pictures like somehow that's going to make me get it. And there is judgment everywhere."

"I'm not judging," he stopped her. "All I'm saying is that they could do things more...you know, efficiently."

"We don't even understand each other. I'm not talking about efficiency. I'm talking about what matters, and you just want to make them more like us. Did you even notice the boys playing in the village? It's not about your salvation versus my salvation. It's not about boats or brick buildings. Why does everything have to be measured through us?"

The Woman looked down at her open hands and then looked past the Companion. He waited for several minutes and then restarted the motor.

"Come on, relax, this is vacation. Why don't you take my picture?"

The Woman hesitated and then picked up the camera. She realized she had been wrong about the river; its beauty had not faded. She focused the lens. It was the perfect picture. The water reflected swatches of green and blue. And there he sat, in the center, fishing pole in hand, smiling for the camera. In his clothing of false colors, he was superimposed on the background, outlined with black marker. She took her last picture and put her camera away.

Satisfied, the Companion was ready to fish. "Let's try this spot. I bet we get lucky and the piranhas are right here."

"Yes," the Woman answered, "I think you are right." She leaned over, touched the river, and watched the steady sequential movement of the water.

