

The Gold Line

“The best time to take a red,” Randy Edwards says, “is first thing in the morning.” It’s before sunrise— quarter to six— and they ride in the white embassy pickup through the peri-urban areas just beyond the airstrip. “Wouldn’t you say, Slick Willie?”

Bill shrugs. The night before was as empty as every other since the accident. Without the sex clubs, it’s Lou Dobbs, *The Global Office*, vodkas with a splash of green Fernandez soda and sleep that really isn’t sleep. When Randy woke him up— his hi-beams shining through the jalousie slats like a pair of broken eggs— he found himself still drunk, damp skin pasted to the pleather couch. “Pills were never my line,” he says.

“Trust me on this. The best time to take a red is first thing in the morning.” Bill doesn’t trust Randy on anything. Right now, nothing sounds worse than fishing, but Randy isn’t someone that one in Bill’s situation says no to.

The neighborhoods they drive through are makeshift and ugly. Maroons who fled the interior during the long, slow civil war have made this area over-populated and under-developed. The rules of hospitality are such that cousins pile four and five to a room in the main houses, and *their* cousins shack in outbuildings and shanties out back.

At this hour, no one is out hustling for beer, cigarettes or *soft* (which the Chinese pour into plastic bags with straws sticking out like catheters for the blacks who can’t or won’t pay the bottle deposits). The streets are empty; Randy drives through them like he knows them well.

“Where are we going?” Bill asks, even though he doesn’t really care.

“Looking for a chum,” Randy says. “My chum’s out here somewhere.” They return to the main road. Bill has been on this stretch before. Just ahead is where some boys have torn a hole in the road; during the day, they shake motorists down for donations to fill it back in.

Randy makes a left and then a quick right. The road is dirt and very dark. When his headlights come across a dog too old to keep up with the packs that control the streets at this hour, it freezes like the proverbial deer. Randy jerks to a stop, and reaches into the

cab's extended area behind the seats. From a cooler behind him, he produces a fist of ground beef. "Be but a minute," he says.

The dog watches as Randy steps into the headlight's beam. White light, pencil thin, frames the edges of his silhouette. Backlit, he looks like an angel stepping into absolute darkness. Against the darkness, Randy casts no shadow. He kneels down about ten feet from the dog, which struggles to its feet. Above the grouchy idle of the pickup, the dog can hardly hear her own bark. But the dog is barking. She steps away from Randy and barks.

Natural selection has bred stupidity out of the dogs down here. They have a keener sense than most of the children. However, as their universe is defined by endless hunger—a hunger that chews at them even when they eat—the dog eventually succumbs to the balls of raw ground beef that Randy tosses at her. She stops barking long enough to get one in her mouth. Finding it satisfactory, she follows the trail of scraps out of the light around to the bed of the pick up.

Vehicles have been known to pass through and never return. She knows better than to climb aboard. She pleads with Randy to put the biggest and last ball of meat on the ground rather than in the pick-up. A degenerative hip condition causes her to doubt she can even get up there. But Randy breaks a morsel off the ball and puts it directly in her mouth. This seals the deal. She jumps; three legs manage to land on the gate. Her fourth spins impotently like a propeller out of the water. She is about to fall when Randy gives her a decisive shove onto the bed. He slams the gate shut and climbs into the cab.

Bill comes to. He isn't sure how long he's been asleep, but the sun is up. His head hurts; his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. It takes a second, but the dread finds its way back to him. He suspects it will be with him the rest of his life.

He knows this road, too. It's widest one through the interior—made and maintained by American aluminum companies—it leads to the dam that juices the entire country. "Where's your friend?" he asks.

"What?"

"Your friend," Bill says, "you said you were going to pick someone up."

Randy's laugh sounds like rolling over gravel. "Right," he says. "Naw, couldn't do it. Had to make do with that old bitch." He indicates behind him. Bill turns around. The dog is walking in circles around the bed of the truck. Distended teats flap like laundry in the truck's draft. Bill can't bear to look for more than a moment. "You know all about bitches," Randy says with that gravelly laugh, "don't you, Slick Willie?"

Bill tries to laugh but it just makes his chest hurt. He needs to be careful with Randy. He needs to remember not to say the wrong thing. The wrong thing leave him in a heap of trouble. "Just my ex-wives," he says. "And their mothers."

Out the window the jungle continues its endless rot. Power lines attached to poles, numbered and spaced a half kilometer apart, run along the bauxite highway. Number one stands at the powerful plant complex where the aluminum is smelted, and they go up from there. Bill tries to remember the number of the last pole by the dam. He would like to know how much further. He's fairly sure it's over two hundred, but does not want to ask. Above the truck's exhaust, he can smell the fermentation of the jungle as it streams through the vents.

"You got anything to drink?"

Randy reaches under his seat and hands Bill a flask. He takes a good pull without smelling it first. It doesn't taste, only burns. Stomach and head in disagreement, he wills himself to keep the liquid down. It takes a minute but he's glad he did, the pressure behind his eyes eases up a bit. Even the sun doesn't seem so hideously bright. He closes his eyes and waits for the numbers on the poles to go up.

The truck stops and Bill opens his eyes. This is Mofu Tapu, not a village really, more of a camp. No women live here, not even whores. The men who come here to make money can't afford them. The sole industries of the camp are transporting goods and people across the large lake that the dam has created, and the handful of stands offering chicken, *bami* noodles and deep fried cassava wedges. There's a Chinese where you can purchase one hundred eighty proof rum, discontinued canned goods, singles of

antibiotics and cigarettes, and a few other things at inflated prices. Hungry-looking chickens peck at the plastic bags that swirl around by the boat launch.

“Now, where is my boy?” Randy asks, without really wanting a response from Bill. He gets out of the truck and slams the door behind him. Bill waits inside.

The National Self-Reliance and Sustainability Party (NZDP) recently came to Mofu Tapu. They brought T-shirts, hats and a pair of chainsaws to remind the people here who it is that will represent their interests after the next election. The party apparel is seen on at least half of the people here today. Things that say NZDP are cleaner than everything else.

Randy’s boy is a sixty-something-year-old man. He wears women’s pants and an oversized T-shirt with an image of Jacques Chirac smoking an oversized joint. “This here’s my boy,” Randy says when Bill walks over to join them. His boy, the *botoman*, squats in his dugout. He tears a T-shirt into strips that he wedges with a machete into cracks in the wood to plug the leaks.

“He’s been asking me for a new motor for his boat. For some reason he thinks I have some kind of pull with the U.S. *lanti*,” Randy says with a wink. Introductions are made. The *botoman* steps onto the shore. His Chinese flip-flops kick up dirt and the dirt stains the stirrups of his women’s pants. Out of respect Bill grabs his own elbow when they shake hands.

“I hope you brought some good line because he’s going to take us to the spot. It’s near his village. We’re going to catch us the motherload.” Randy turns to his boy. “*We go na joe konde, toch?*”

“*Ai, Blikse Konde*,” he says nodding.

“*Moi, man. Moi*,” Randy says. “Blikse Konde—that’s his old village. I’ve seen dogs smaller than these fish.”

Bill claps his hands together lamely. “Yes.”

They bring the truck over by the boat. The locals feign disinterest while Randy coaxes the dog out of the truck with more meat than they eat in a week. Meanwhile, Bill sets their equipment on a tarp by the launch. He lays out their poles, tackle boxes, two coolers and the rifle Randy insisted on bringing.

Randy's boy has his own boy—a young kid in nothing but shorts that don't zip right, an NZDP hat and Chinese flip-flops. He loads Randy's and Bill's goods onto a pallet in the center of the dugout under the close scrutiny of the *botoman*.

No amount of meat is going to get the dog onto the boat. Randy finally picks her up. He walks around to the side of the boat and, standing knee-deep in the lake, drops her in. She staggers in the dugout. Whimpering, she crawls under a bench seat. Once flat, she puts a paw over her muzzle. Bill climbs in after Randy. He, too, would like to whimper but cannot. He must act normal. He grabs hard onto the sides of the wooden canoe and keeps his center low as he makes his way to his seat. The *botoman* says something that the others catch. Whatever it is, Bill is pretty sure he's its object. Randy laughs loudest.

No one bothered to log the area before the big lake was made some thirty years ago. Helpless, the mighty root structures of hardwoods slowly choked under the rising waters. Now their spines, black and lifeless, pierce the surface of the lake like quills on a dead porcupine.

Like most of the traffic on the lake, they follow the treeless footprint of the old river. The river narrows and swells as it bends around what are now sunken obstacles. Bill watches the dead trees that had once marked the river's edge glide by him. In boat trips along other rivers, Bill has seen monkeys, toucans, even fresh water porpoises. But here there is only waterlogged lifelessness. It becomes difficult for him to think of anything but death. When he closes his eyes, he sees the girl—from the club. When he opens them again, he sees the gap between her teeth eerily mirrored in the pass the river carves through skeleton forest.

At some marker completely invisible to Bill, the *botoman* abruptly steers off the course of the river and into the dense gloom of dead trees. The kid stands up at the bow without being told. He uses a long stick to nudge the boat away from any obstacles that the *botoman* cannot see from the stern. As the twigs blanket and scrape against them, the *botoman* eases off the throttle. Randy hands Bill the flask and Bill takes a drink. It burns going down, then cuddles his brain.

Randy lifts his rifle. He looks down its long barrel, searching for something to lock onto. But there are no birds, no decent targets. He points the rifle over Bill's shoulder, presumably at the *botoman* behind him. "Bang," he says lifting the barrel in pantomime of the arm's kick.

Bill turns around to gauge the response of the *botoman*. From his expression, it is difficult to tell if he even noticed. "Nah," Randy says, "I can't kill him. We'd never find our way out of here. He knows that better than anyone." Then, addressing the *botoman*: "*Ifu mi ki joe, mi lasi-pasi. Mi dede.*"

"*Ai,*" the *botoman* says, nodding his head once.

Bill takes another hit from the flask. He tightens the lid on the bottle. The sight of Randy is making him sick. He stares down at his hands, just so he doesn't have to look at him. He pushes the heels of his palms into the sockets of his eyes.

The bright day goes black; from the edges, blue, then purple slowly bruise the black. The colors fragment and again he's seeing the girl just as she looked that night. Before the ditch behind the airstrip. When she blows him a kiss, he finds himself wishing that God or something, anything else would grind him to dust. He presses harder against the sockets, but finds himself lacking the will to go further.

He eases his hands away from his eyes. The back of Randy's head gradually comes into focus. As the cones and rods realign, a golden aura clings to Randy's silhouette then disappears.

They reach a narrow path cleared of trees. The boy sits down in the bow of the boat. "We're on the railroad tracks," Randy says. And indeed, out of sight and beneath them some undeterminable distance is the Gold Line, the train the Dutch created to support mining efforts in the interior. Nothing runs any longer; in a train-yard not far from the city, the bush swallows the old boxcars whole. But the path the tracks hew through the lake is straight and clean. The *botoman* opens the throttle and the boat's wake widens.

Randy leans forward and taps the boy on the shoulder with the muzzle of his rifle. The boy turns around and Randy says something that Bill cannot hear over the motor. Silently, the boy climbs first over Randy and then Bill before reaching the pallet in the

middle of the boat. He reaches into a cooler and finds a liter bottle of beer. With his teeth he opens the bottle and fills four plastic cups. To poor, parched Bill, the beer is like oxygen. He holds it in his mouth to preserve the feeling a little longer before he swallows. When he's done, he passes his cup back and wordlessly, the boy refills it.

After a couple more cups of beer, the Gold Line abruptly gives way to a wider clearing. In an area of a couple hundred yards, only one tree in the center of the clearing pierces the surface of the water; it's much taller than the other dead trees on the lake. Like the old river and the path of the Gold Line, the boundary of the clearing is marked by what had once been ever-growing bush. Bill hasn't a clue how far he is from dry land.

The *botoman* brings them to the center of the clearing and kills the motor. "Bliksen Konde," he announces. His village. Or what was his village before the dam flooded the area.

"Not much of a town if you ask me," Randy says. "But my boy is proud of it. To him this place is the fucking motherland. And these bush people take that shit seriously. He even tried to stick around when the water was rising. Last minute he had to take to his boat. *Ja toch?*" He says to the *botoman*.

The *botoman* shrugs.

Bill peers into the water; he looks for some remaining structure from the village, but the water only sends back his desperate-looking face. "Peaceful out here isn't it?" Randy says.

To Bill, peaceful is sitting in the recliner watching a couple of mid-majors battle it out on ESPN's weekly college football broadcast. This is anything but: he feels like a fly tethered to a string. Nonetheless, he nods his head, yes, vaguely.

"It's the perfect antidote to a long night out. On the make," Randy says, then raises his eyebrows. "But I don't have to tell you about that."

Bill feels his mouth go dry. He tilts his cup back but finds himself out of beer. *Randy knows what he's done*. Bill knows it like he knows himself. He just wishes that Randy would come out and say it, throw cuffs on him and ship him back to the States for trial.

Think, he thinks. He tries to remember if he might have said something to Randy that would have given himself away. But he's not thinking clearly. He'd like to squeeze his head, to make his hands into a vise and really squeeze at the temples, but fears that it might convey a sense of guilt. Heroically, he stages an effort to harness his thoughts. "I wouldn't know anything about that," he says.

As soon as the words leave his mouth he begins to doubt that he's responded to the right question, or if a question was even asked. His left hand brushes against his temple. He scratches the back of his head.

"What's that?" Randy says.

Bill strains. He tells himself to think. *Think*, he thinks. *Clear your fucking head. Your life depends on it. Your life! This man doesn't just work for the embassy; he's intel.* Bill doesn't know how he knows it, but he knows it. *Randy is definitely intel.* And there's no telling what he knows, not to mention what Bill has already told him.

But all this thinking hurts his head. "Nights out," Bill says, "I wouldn't know anything about that."

"Well then, maybe you don't need all this peace." Randy looks intently down the sight of his rifle. His finger massages the trigger like its foreplay.

"The only problem is that there's nothing out here to shoot."

Both of Bill's hands are rubbing his temples. He wishes there were some sign of the village that had been here. But there is nothing more than dead trees and still water. He wonders what else might be made to disappear. "Should we do some fishing?" Bill asks, gasping between the words.

"Next time remind me to bring some monkeys out here. I'll put them in the trees and then paddle away. We can do some distance shooting. *Ja, toch?*"

The *botoman* takes them to the good spot, where the piranhas are as big as small dogs. "It's above their burial ground," Randy says to Bill. Using paddles, the kid and the *botoman* take them through trees to another clearing, a few hundred meters from the village. The kid ties the dugout to a tree on the edge of the clearing.

Then Randy stands up in the boat. He climbs over benches to the pallet. He brings the rods and tackle box back to where they sit and attends to his rod. He ties a steel leader on to his thirty-pound test line. His body radiates heat.

Bill edges away from him just to stay cool. He takes his pole, looks at it for a minute, then sets it back down. He snaps his fingers at the kid. “Beer,” he says, pointing to his empty cup. The kid fills his cup. “Thank you,” he says.

“You aren’t going to believe how easy this is,” Randy says. “Fish in a barrel.”

He moves to the bow of the boat with his rod and rifle. “You’re going to want to be up here when we do this. To see how it’s done.”

Bill doesn’t feel so hot. Unsure of himself and not altogether sober, he grabs the sides as he goes, and duck-walks to the seat behind Randy. He straddles the bench. “Don’t worry about your rod,” Randy says, “you won’t need your rod for right now. I just want to show you how it’s done.”

With his thumb, index and middle fingers, Randy rolls a ball of hamburger meat the size of an eye. “I’ve got to tell you, you don’t look so hot. Maybe you’re working too hard. Take a page out of these guys’ book,” Randy says, indicating to the *botoman* and his assistant who sit at the other end of the boat. He drives the hook into the meat. “In this weather you got to take it easy.”

Bill has to peel his tongue off the roof of his mouth to speak. “I just haven’t been sleeping too well,” he says.

Randy laughs. “You need to start making use of local resources,” he says, “get a little someone to get your willie slick. They grow on trees down here— bitches.”

Bill’s heart shivers; as dry as his mouth is, his hands are wet.

“Yeah, *toch*,” Randy says to the locals. They nod their heads. The *botoman* cleans under his nails with a long splinter he has pulled off the boat.

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Bill says at last.

“No?” Randy says, giving Bill a hard stare.

Bill does his best to meet Randy’s eyes, but finds his gaze drifting downward to the ball of meat and the hook that splices it. A lump forms in his throat. Randy knows what he’s done, knows that he’s killed her and now toys with him like a mouse with its

prey. To keep from screaming, or worse, confessing, Bill clamps his hands around his wooden bench and squeezes. He needs to figure out who Randy is. He could be from the Agency, or DOD—the military has got all kinds of advisors down here—answerable only to the Secretary and the President himself. Looking down at the hook, he can feel Randy’s eyes bore into him like radioactive worms. *Yes, Randy’s some kind of intel.*

Bill knows nothing about that world. But he knows enough to know that they have their ways of gathering information. And when they get it, they put it to use. He’d like to come clean, to get it all off his chest and let Randy do what he will with the information. But something—a lingering hope that he’s got it all wrong, that Randy’s just like everyone else down here, that he did someone a favor and was rewarded with a post without responsibility—holds his tongue in check. Resisting the urge to bury his head in his hands, he tries to assume a look of complete innocence. “I guess I don’t get out much,” he says.

Randy stares a moment longer, then suddenly lightens up. He shrugs. “You should. Dip the quill in the old ink jar. It’ll make a world of difference.

“Now watch this.” It happens. The moment the dog had to know would come. In a movement that shocks Bill—as much for its swiftness and fluidity as for its apparent lack of purpose—Randy grabs the dog by her nape, pulls her cleanly from beneath the bench and drops her into the water.

Even though she has been expecting this or something like it since morning, the dog is surprised to be in the water. It’s her first time swimming. Nothing in water is solid. Her legs spin like egg beaters, but find only water beneath them. But she manages to keep her head up. She moves lengthwise along the boat, looking upwards ruefully at Randy, who stands in the boat. She yelps repeatedly.

From the water, the steep angle makes Randy seem to hover above them all. Before today, she had no experience with white people. She now knows them to be ordained with powers darker than ordinary men.

“So long, old chum,” Randy says, laughing. The kid is laughing too—like mad. Bill spreads his hands across his face. Yelping, she finds herself pondering his weakness.

She's looking at the weak one, thinking she should have bitten him when she had the chance, when Randy raises his rifle. He fires.

Bill peeks between his fingers. It's been his experience that a shot in the bush triggers hysteric flurries from birds, monkeys and God knows what else. But here on this dead lake, there is nothing. Even the kid stops laughing.

Time melts into a slow drip. The only sounds are the dog's howls, which get muffled by the water she begins to take in. Bill looks between his fingers to see that the dog has been hit somewhere beneath the surface of the water. A cloud of blood emerges; it traces the desperate paddles of the dog.

Before long the piranhas sniff her out. When they do, the dog's screams raise in pitch. They sound like whistles from a kettle. Bill is relieved when, finally, enough water fills her lungs that there is no room for wind. But he still gets sick. He leans over the edge of the dugout and vomits into the water.

And for once the water offers up an image other than Bill's own reflection. A few inches below, fish devour bits of vomit. Transfixed, Bill can see the red eyes of a piranha as it climbs through the chain of chunks to the surface of the water. In the animal's eye, he can see a rage pure enough to sustain itself from the dinosaurs to the present without making any concession to the constant prodding of evolution. The fish swims closer.

Bill feels as though he is staring down death itself. With scarcely the time to articulate it, even to himself, it crosses his mind that he could just roll over into the water and be done with it. These beasts would make short work of him. It is, after all, what he deserves. He's prepared to go when he feels a hand grab his collar and pull him back into the boat. He looks up and sees the boy, the *botoman's* assistant, standing above him laughing.

"Be careful, Willie," Randy says, "these fuckers will jump right out of the water and bite your nose clear off."

Randy casts a line into the bloodied water. "They're the devil's spawn," he says. "The little bit of them that isn't muscle is teeth." Bill lies back. The sky, an impossible shade of blue, stretches out beyond. In the stern, hovering above him like a black angel,

is the foreshortened torso of the *botoman*. Utterly indifferent to Bill's anguish, Jacques Chirac puffs on his enormous joint. "Bite me, you little fucks," Randy says.

He recasts and this time gets a bite. The fish jerks on the line hard enough to jar the boat. "Whoa," he says. His pole bends nearly as low as Bill feels and Randy lets out his line. "She's a biggie."

It's a long struggle. To Bill it's interminable. The fish swims out, and Randy reels it back. Just when something is about to snap, he lets the line out again. Bill would like to jump in, but he knows that the boy would just fish him out. "You're not getting away from me, you little fuck," Randy says.

And it's true: Randy manages to haul the piranha in. It's big. Hanging on the line, it's at least as long as Bill's calf; its jaw looks large enough to swallow a man's fist. Bill finds himself staring into the fish's red eyeball. Randy swings the pole over to the kid, who in one move cuts the line and bashes the fish's head against the boat.

Randy tells the kid he can have it. He takes a swig from his flask then passes it to Bill, who chokes down a sip.

The ride back is quiet. Randy slips him another red. "Believe me," he says, "you look like you could use it."

For a few precious hours the world becomes far away. Bill exists on the wrong end of a telescope. Everything—the water, the dead trees, the sky above him—is impossibly out of reach. What Randy knows or doesn't know is of no consequence. The world is a place of unspeakable suffering; if Bill is to spend the balance of days in a prison cell, at home in front of the TV, or even here on this infernal lake, it can make no difference.

Wherever he is, he's always already alone with what he's done.