

## How Many Legs Does a Bear Have?

ONLY LATER DID CALEB REMEMBER THE FISH. Then he stood on the back deck with the freezer door open, the machine thrumming and clouds pouring out, staring at the round, unblinking frozen eye.

It had been Ken's idea, the whole thing. Caleb did not fish. He'd never caught a fish in his life. As a kid he'd followed Ken to all the ponds and streams in the woods near their house, and there had been plenty of fishing weekends with their father at that very cabin. But Caleb didn't have the patience for it. He enjoyed being out there in the woods. It was just the fishing part, holding the empty rod in his hands. He'd watch the water and nothing would happen and after a time he'd grow restless, bored. He'd reel in, then wander the woods kicking rocks and looking for squirrels.

In the letter, Ken wrote that he had some vacation days saved up. Lauren was going to take the kids to Jersey for a long weekend with her folks. That left Ken open for three days. He was going to drive up and they'd have a weekend, just the two of them. It would be like old times. It was exactly what Ken needed, he wrote.

Just like Ken, Caleb thought. A fishing weekend. Caleb had the cabin to himself. The lake was there. If he had wanted to fish he could have. But there was nothing to do. It was all set up, as Ken had written.

He'd even have supplies. What his brother could possibly mean by supplies, Caleb did not know. The cabin was fully outfitted. Ken knew that. He'd spent time there himself, though it had been years. Their father had taken them up to the cabin when they were kids. Back then a weekend spent fishing, hunting, and playing rummy in the glow of an oil lamp was something to look forward to. Later their father had run electricity to the cabin and bought a refrigerator to go on the back deck. He'd even pumped water up from the lake, converting one of the old closets into a bathroom with a toilet that flushed into the small septic unit behind the woodshed. Caleb and their father had dug the hole for it together.

Caleb received Ken's letter on a Wednesday. On Friday he prepared for his brother's arrival by sweeping out the cabin and then pouring himself a large glass of whiskey from the half-gallon bottle in the cabinet. He sat on the back porch, at the table beside the big white humming refrigerator, looking through the pine trees to the water winking in the sun. The cabin sat on almost thirty acres. It was quiet and peaceful there on the deck.

HE HEARD THE SOUND OF A CAR, the soft ticking of its engine as it rolled down the dirt road, the crunching of roots and old needles beneath its tires. Caleb stood and carried his glass into the kitchen. He returned the whiskey bottle to the cabinet, ran the faucet, and splashed water onto his face.

Out the window the small green BMW that had been left to Ken in their father's will inched past the straight trees. The brakes whined as it stopped beside the woodshed. The windshield reflected the trunks of the trees and the softened glare of a past-noon sun.

"You made it," Caleb said. He stood on the front porch with his hands on his hips.

Ken got slowly out of the car. His eyes moved everywhere, as if he were taking stock of the situation, looking for snipers. Caleb laughed.

"What's so funny," Ken said.

"Enemy fire," Caleb said. "What have you got in there?"

"What do you mean?"

Caleb stepped down off the porch and approached the car. He and Ken extended their hands and shook, then hugged with their hands still clasped, one-armed.

“Where’s the supplies?” Caleb said.

“I brought some food,” Ken said. He motioned to the BMW’s trunk. “I didn’t know what you’d have up here.”

“You make it sound like the North Pole,” Caleb said.

“Well,” Ken said.

Caleb put his hands in his pockets and looked up at the canopy. It made him dizzy. He blinked his eyes and made a face at Ken.

“I guess we should get your stuff inside,” Caleb said.

“Everything all right?” Ken said.

“Sure,” Caleb said. “Pop the trunk.”

Ken had brought three plastic grocery bags full of cans—coffee and vegetable soup and tomato sauce and beans—along with his duffel, sleeping bag, and his fishing rod and tackle box. They pulled everything from the trunk and lugged it inside to the kitchen, where they piled it all onto the kitchen table and chairs.

“You been drinking?” Ken said when they were done.

Caleb leaned against the sink, his breath running ragged out of him. He began rolling a cigarette on the countertop.

“Can we just not?” Caleb said without looking over.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early?” Ken said. “I can smell it.”

“Good for you,” Caleb said.

Behind him the screen door slapped shut. After a minute he looked. Ken stood out in the driveway gazing around at the old familiar property. When they’d opened the trunk an enormous whiff of some long forgotten scent had risen out. It had hit Caleb right in the face and for a moment he felt again that dizziness. The whiskey was working on him, he’d thought. Blame it on the whiskey. But it smelled like he was eleven years old. That was it. No specific memory or ghosts called up from the basement. Just a sense that he was eleven again and with no idea of what was facing him down the road.

Caleb wiped his mouth of tobacco. He lit the cigarette and walked to the screen door.

“What were you thinking,” he called out to his brother. “About today, I mean.”

“I’m not partial to anything,” Ken said from his knees beside their father’s car. He brushed at the side panel and straightened up. “Whatever you want to do. We could fish for dinner.”

Caleb came out the door and sat down on the edge of the porch. He shrugged and slapped his thigh.

“Well, I guess,” he said.

THEY STOMPED DOWN THE HILL to the dock. Ken carried the tackle box at his side though they’d already dressed their lines. Caleb had the old rod and reel from the hall closet. It was their father’s rod, now nearly an antique.

They set up at the end of the dock, just below the empty flagpole. A light wind rippled the surface of the water. Caleb checked behind his shoulder, then cast out into the lake. The lure fell and settled under.

“There are a lot of browns this time of year,” Ken said behind Caleb’s back.

“I remember,” Caleb said.

“Okay,” Ken said. “You been out at all?”

“I took the canoe out last week,” Caleb said as he began to reel in. “But I wasn’t fishing. I went down to the old sawmill. I hadn’t been down there in a while.”

Ken said, “Sherm and I went fishing for rainbows a few weeks back. Ended up with nothing but smallmouth.”

Caleb cast again. Ken lifted the tackle box and started back down the dock.

“I’m going to try the Point,” Ken said.

“Good luck,” Caleb said.

He watched his line pulled by the slow current of the water. His brother’s footsteps shook the old dock like the small tremors of a distant earthquake. Caleb looked back toward land. The trees hung over the water and made a black mouth around the dock. Ken moved into it and was gone.

Caleb hadn't seen Ken in almost a year. There was always the chance that this time would be different, that they'd act and feel like brothers. But now he was already thinking of having Ken gone, of being alone once more with the cabin and their father's land to himself.

Caleb sat down on the warped wood planks and rested his back against the upright. He secured the foot of the rod beneath his leg and rolled another cigarette. The clouds were fat and fast-moving and he watched them as he smoked. Occasionally he glanced at where the line disappeared into the dappled water. Nothing was going to bite. The better idea was to let Ken have his fun and leave thinking he'd done his best.

He flipped the cigarette into the lake, reeled his line in, and set the rod under his arm once more. He was done fishing. In the cabin he propped the rod against the kitchen table and took the whiskey bottle down from its shelf.

"Here's to us," Caleb said, standing alone in the middle of the kitchen with the glass raised to the ceiling.

KEN SKIMMED THE LURE out low over the water, casting sidearm. He waited for the plop and sink before slowly reeling back in a few feet at a time, giving the fish a chance to see the sunlight glinting off the lure's back. He was casting at a spot just behind a submerged boulder, a spot the two of them had snorkeled as children. Back then it was the Pirate Rock and treasure was buried in one of the shallow caves beneath it. When the line was in Ken cast again, his arm parallel to the water, the lure dropping just beyond the break of the boulder. He repeated this motion over and over while Caleb watched from the bushes along the shore. Ken had been at it nearly an hour.

"Hey," Caleb called.

Ken glanced over his shoulder. "Hey."

"Forget this," Caleb said. He raised his arms up in the air. "Let's head into town. Grab a drink? Bite to eat?"

"Okay," Ken said. "Give me a couple more casts."

Caleb ducked under the branches, holding his glass in front of him so he didn't spill. He could feel the colour in his cheeks, a kind of

radiating warmth that started in his chest. They'd drop by The Whistle, see Jenny, play a couple games of pool, eat a sandwich. He had a sudden desire to sit and talk with his brother. They'd really talk for a change. And Caleb would explain that this was what he needed—*this*, being out there in the woods and spending time alone and figuring things out. It wasn't a bad thing. It wasn't something that needed changing. He would explain this to Ken because he needed to. He wanted his brother to understand. He was the only one who could.

But when Ken returned to the cabin he was grinning and holding a large trout by the gills. It must have been ten, fifteen pounds, Caleb guessed. Its body was long and yellow-brown, covered in reddish spots, its skin shining back the last of the day's light.

"Check it out," Ken said in the kitchen.

"Wow," Caleb said. "You got one."

"Last cast," Ken said. "Just goes to show you."

"Well hurry up," Caleb said. "I'm starved."

"You don't still want to go into town?"

"Hell yes I do," Caleb said. "Didn't I say that?"

"But I got one."

"That'll take forever. Put it in the freezer. We'll cook it tomorrow."

Ken shook his head. He carried the fish through the kitchen and out onto the back porch. Caleb heard him cleaning it on the work table. He pictured the fish zipped open, the entrails scooped out and thrown down the hill toward the lake. He heard the freezer door open and close. Then Ken came back through wiping his knife on his pants, which were wet up to the knee from standing in the shallows.

"Dad should never have left you this place," Ken said.

"You want to trade?" Caleb said. He meant the car, knowing Ken would never accept the offer.

"Mom wants to sell it," Ken said. He ran the faucet and rubbed the bar of soap between his hands.

"The car?"

"The cabin," Ken said.

"It's not hers to sell."

“I’m just telling you.”

Caleb shook his head and finished his drink. “You guys are unbelievable,” he said.

“I thought you’d want to know,” Ken said.

“Ready to go?” Caleb said.

THEY SAT ACROSS A DIRTY TABLE at the back of The Whistle. They’d already finished their burgers and now they leaned back against the cracked vinyl padding of the booth seats, playing with the labels of their beers. Jenny was up front, behind the bar. She was wearing a low-cut blouse and she kept laughing and flipping her hair over her shoulder.

“Making friendly with the clientele,” Caleb said.

“What?” Ken looked up.

“Ah,” Caleb said. “Nothing.”

Ken turned in his seat to look around the bar. “Lot of military guys these days,” he said.

“The base is running again,” Caleb said.

“Dad would have a heart attack,” Ken said. “Between that and all the new houses going up.”

“That’s rich,” Caleb said. “I mean, considering.”

“So what’s the story with you and the bartender,” Ken said.

“Jenny?” Caleb said. “Not much to tell. I see her around sometimes.”

“Huh,” Ken said.

“How’s things at home?” Caleb said. “The wife and kids.”

“Good,” Ken said. “Really good.”

“Satisfying?”

Ken frowned and said, “Sure. Why?”

“I’m just asking,” Caleb said. “What’s the best thing?”

“Jesus,” Ken said. “So now you want to get serious all of a sudden? What’s the best thing about living in that stupid cabin?”

“I don’t know,” Caleb said. “The sound of the water first thing in the morning? Privacy? The fact that I don’t have to deal with shitty conversations like this one?”

He lifted up his beer and let a few long pulls down his throat before setting it back on the table. He breathed through his nose, craning his neck to look around the place. It seemed that every time he got close to something he lost it.

“I want to put some money in the juke,” Ken said. “You got a single?” Caleb looked through his wallet and handed two over. Ken got up from the table and wandered over to the jukebox against the wall. The bar was filled with smoke and GIs. Caleb’s vision felt foggy. He watched Ken lean over the juke to flip the pages of music. His brother’s hair was going thin and Caleb thought that he was wearing it differently than the last time he’d seen him. Ken looked older.

Otis Redding came on the speakers. Caleb coughed on his beer and laughed. “Hey yeah,” he called over to his brother.

Ken glanced at him and kept flipping through the music.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Caleb said when Ken returned to the table.

“I haven’t heard this in years,” Ken said.

Caleb straightened up and said, “What happened to Dad’s record collection?”

“Don’t know,” Ken said. “Basement?”

“I want it,” Caleb said.

“Talk to Mom,” Ken said.

Caleb said, “How’s it feel to be back?”

“Here?” Ken said. “Fine. It’s okay.”

“Do you—when was the last time you made it up here?”

Ken shrugged. “Seven, eight years?”

Caleb shook his head. It took him a second to swallow. “I was seventeen. You were twenty.”

“Really?” Ken said. “I don’t know how you remember that stuff.”

“These—arms—of—*mine*,” Caleb sang.

Ken grinned and finished his beer. He motioned to Caleb. “You want another one?”

“Let me,” Caleb said.

At the bar Jenny took his order and turned away. She had something else going tonight and that was fine, Caleb thought. Ken was here. It

wasn't that kind of night anyway. Let come what may, what may. Jenny was free to do what she wanted.

Caleb turned to look at his brother. Ken was sitting at the table where he'd left him. But there was another guy sitting across from him in Caleb's seat. They were talking. The back of the stranger's head was shorn up high to the crown where it flattened into a shelf. Ken frowned and nodded. Then he shrugged. The man got up from the table, glancing over at Caleb before turning back to Ken and saying one last thing. Ken shook his head and smirked.

"What was that about?" Caleb dropped into the seat and nodded to the pool table where the man was now lining up his shot. A bunch of similar looking guys stood around laughing and holding beers.

"Ah," Ken said and brushed his hand in the air.

"What?" Caleb said.

"Nothing," Ken said. "He didn't like the music."

"What'd he say?"

"That he didn't like the music," Ken said. "Forget it."

But Caleb couldn't. He sat at the table for a few minutes trading empty statements with his brother. His mind, though, was on the guy at the pool table who was driving home the eight ball and slapping fives with his buddies. Caleb got up.

"I hear you don't like the music," he said to the man with the crewcut. In truth he wasn't exactly sure he'd gotten the right guy. They all looked remarkably the same: thick and big-jawed in the green glow of the pool table.

"Who's this guy?" the man said to his friends. "Check this guy out."

Caleb said, "My brother tells me you've got a problem with the music?"

As he said this Caleb realized Ken was behind him. He took Caleb's elbow in his hand and leaned into the back of his ear. "Cool it," Ken whispered. "This is stupid."

The man grinned. "Your boyfriend's a good guy," he said. "And I get it. But the rest of us shouldn't have to listen to this crap. I mean, what even *is* this?"

Later Caleb would wish he'd made some reference to the guy's lack of soul. But his mind was slow, as smoky as the air in the bar. And the man was still talking.

"Behind closed doors. You know what I'm saying? Let's hear some real music."

One of his friends raised his palm at Caleb. "Be cool," the new one said. "You want to be cool."

They turned away from Caleb and went immediately back to laughing and giving each other five. Somebody put more quarters in the table and racked the balls. Caleb was still standing there. His heart was loud in his chest. He felt his jaw clenching. He wanted a cigarette and another drink. What he really wanted, though, was to burn the entire place to the ground. The men had already forgotten him. Ken was standing by his side, pulling his elbow back toward their table.

"Forget it," Ken said. "I don't want this."

Caleb looked around the bar, full of bodies moving in and out of the smoke drifting up from ashtrays. He didn't recognize anyone. Jenny was looking at him, but as soon as she caught his eye she looked away, reaching for a bottle.

"Let's get out of here," Ken said.

"I'm all right," Caleb said. "Really. It's still early."

Of course Ken was right. Their father would have had a heart attack if he could have seen what the town had become in the short time since his death. Cheap prefab mansions had appeared on every inch of shorefront property, two or three to an acre. And the entire town was now a military base. Every bar, restaurant, store, and gas station was filled with crewcuts and their young wives, their giant trucks. Caleb tried to imagine what his father would have said. Chances are he wouldn't have said anything. He'd have bought a bottle and brought it back to the cabin, to the quiet and peace afforded by thirty acres. That in itself was an act of resistance.

"Man," Caleb said. He sat back down and looked at his beer. "So," he said.

Ken drank his beer. “Things are good,” he said. “Lauren’s fine, and the kids—the kids, it’s amazing. They just keep going. All the scrapes and falls and then they’re back up and running. You should see them.”

“Yeah,” Caleb said, frowning. He should, he knew. A year to a kid was incomprehensible. What was it? Was it like dog years, seven for every one?

“What about you,” Ken said. “Everyone’s worried about you.”

“Sure,” Caleb said. “I know that.”

“Well?”

“You want another one?”

Ken stood up from the table. “Last one,” he said. “And it’s my turn. Then we’re going. Deal?”

“Deal,” Caleb said.

He watched his brother approach the bar. He watched Ken lean toward Jenny and raise two fingers. He was glad Ken was here. Then the juke switched. The guitars started soft, then the drums, and then Smokey Robinson came up crooning “Tracks of My Tears.” And Caleb turned to the pool table where the young GI was already facing him, grinning and winking across the room and patting his chest over his heart.

Ken came back to the table with two beers. He set one in front of Caleb and the other at his place.

“Where’s the bathroom in here?” Ken said.

“Up front,” Caleb said and pointed.

He might have laughed and cried in the same moment. For when Ken was gone Caleb was up from the table and moving. He held the empty bottle by the neck, low and at his side. He crossed the room and when he was behind the GI he brought the bottle up and swung it across his body, connecting with the back of the man’s head. The bottle didn’t break. Caleb realized as the force went up his arm that he’d expected it to shatter. The bottle barely made a sound over the music, Smokey’s familiar and aching voice. The man fell to one knee. He put

a hand up to the back of his head and turned. Then Caleb hit him just below the eye.

The man was up then and on him, tackling him around the ribs. Caleb felt something give way beneath him and it seemed like he was falling for a long time. Distantly he heard the sounds of things breaking. He tried to raise his arms but couldn't. A light burst behind his eyes and then another. Someone was saying *fucker* over and over. He felt something against his mouth and he bit down into it, wrenching his head from side to side. He jacked a knee straight up and the weight above him fell away. There were other fists hitting him. Someone was yelling and maybe it was Ken and then the lights came up—a sudden flood of bright, cold white—and the music cut out.

He was outside in the parking lot and Ken was pulling him toward the BMW. The light was twisted, filtered through a warped glass. Ken's face appeared blue green beside him. The air was cold for August. Caleb licked the inside of his cheek, which felt full of something. He pushed his brother's arm away and fell into the dirt beside the car.

HE WOKE ON THE COUCH in the den. He opened his eyes and looked around before attempting to sit up. His mouth was swollen and sore. Dried blood crusted his nostrils. His head felt huge. An egg grew at the hairline above his right eye. When he touched it he winced, splitting his lip afresh. The memory was there but he put it out of his mind. He would return to it later.

Ken was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

"Where'd you sleep," Caleb said.

"On the bed," Ken said. He took a sip of his coffee. "I used my sleeping bag," he said, as if that were an explanation of something.

"Oh," Caleb said.

He spooned some coffee into a cup and filled it from the kettle. His hands were swollen and difficult to use. Ken watched him from across the table. Caleb brought the mug to his lips, but he couldn't drink it. He set the cup down and closed his eyes, breathing deeply to quell the nausea.

“The water’s warm this year,” Ken said. “I went for a swim this morning. I was surprised.”

“What time is it?” Caleb said.

“Almost noon.”

Caleb nodded and stared into the coffee. It was work just to keep his eyes open. He didn’t look at Ken, but he could feel him there, watching. He tried to think of something to say, anything. At the same time he cherished the silence.

“Look,” Ken said.

“Yeah.”

“I talked to Lauren this morning,” Ken said. “She wants me in Jersey with them. I’m going to drive down, spend the rest of the weekend there. But you should come and visit us sometime.”

Caleb nodded at his brother. Ken had a scrape just above his eye that had scabbed over in the night. Other than that he looked just the same.

“And you should call Mom.”

Caleb sat there while Ken got up and put his things together. It took him little time. After a trip out to the car Ken stood in the doorway looking down at him.

“Are you all right?” Ken said.

“Sure,” Caleb said. He was tired and wanted Ken to go. He had nothing to offer anyone.

“All right,” Ken said and went out the door.

Caleb stood and watched through the screen. Ken got into the driver’s seat of their father’s car and closed the door very gently. The window was partway down.

“Hey,” Caleb called from the doorway. He pushed the door open and stepped onto the porch.

Ken rolled the window down the rest of the way and stuck his head out. “Yeah?” he said.

“How many legs does a bear have?” Caleb said.

“What’s that mean?”

Caleb shrugged. "It's just something I heard once," he said.

Ken looked at the ground, then back up to his brother. "I mean, four, right?" he said.

"I guess," Caleb said. "Stupid question, right?"

Ken pulled his head back into the old green BMW and put the car in gear. He looked out the back before turning again to the cabin and to Caleb standing there with the door propped. Caleb thought he was going to say something more. But Ken just put a hand out the window. The car backed up to the dirt road, turned, and Caleb watched as his brother manoeuvred the car slowly over the dips and roots on his way out.