

Take Me to the River

In a final act of desperation, I try to swing one leg over the gate. The brass finial that I am clenching with my right hand tears free, and I let out a cry as my body swings downward like a pendulum. My left hand's feeble grip on the brass rail is all that is keeping me from tumbling into the apportioned sets of gnashing teeth below. One of the dogs sinks its frothing fangs into the cuff of my jeans and pulls me down further, until my boots are almost touching the ground. Just as suddenly, a pair of strong hands grab my forearms and yank me up. For a moment there is equilibrium between the two forces, and I feel like I am being stretched apart. I kick at the feral beast until it finally relents its iron grip, and the hands pull me up and over the gate. The two of us fall backward and land splayed out in the grass on the other side of the gate as pairs of luminous eyes peer through the darkness at us.

"Jesus Sadie, I thought you were dead meat for sure" Rajon says in between gasps for air.

"Well I thought you were just going to leave me there" I reply accusingly.

Rajon grins sheepishly. "Of course not, then I wouldn't have anyone to explore this place with."

"You're an asshole."

I look down and realize that I'm still holding the brass finial. Rajon notices too.

"Huh, looks like you got a little souvenir out of this whole ordeal."

"Pretty cool, right?" I say as I hit him with it.

"Ouch."

"Oh come on, that wasn't even that hard!" I protest.

I get to my feet and flick on my flashlight. The faint light reveals an enormous building in front of us, once a bustling fish processing plant but now completely derelict. The faded blue sheet metal siding is interspersed with patches of rust and clumps of ivy. The frame of the building is surprisingly intact. We glance at each other.

"After you" Rajon offers.

I try the main entrance, but it seems to be locked. We skirt around the side of the building until we find an emergency exit propped open by a lone construction cone. We move cautiously up a flight of concrete stairs and come upon a narrow catwalk overlooking the entire facility. I slowly direct the pale beam of my flashlight across the entirety of the space, revealing an industrial jungle of steam cookers, centrifuges, and conveyor belts. We make our way to the end of the catwalk where we find what was once the main office. A handful of faded balsa wood desks separated by cracked particle boards are scattered around. Each desk is littered with faded documents, antiquated computer monitors, and personal paraphernalia. The entropy of the place feels threatening.

"Wow, they didn't even bother to clear any of this out" Rajon says uneasily.

"I know, it seems like they left in a hurry. Let's see if we can find anything interesting" I say as I pick up an ancient manila folder labeled "Footwear Ledger." We sift through the paperwork for several minutes hoping to find something of interest.

"Hey, check this out," Rajon says, holding up an old moleskin journal, "Maybe there's information in here explaining what happened."

"That's weird," I say, "Who the hell keeps a personal diary of their job?"

Rajon shrugs. "Dunno. I guess someone who prefers to procrastinate."

He starts flipping through the entries. Most of them are mundane descriptions of the supervisor's daily routine.

"Wait, go back" I say as I peer over his shoulder, "This one looks interesting."

The entry is titled "Mysterious Noises." It reads:

"There have been reports of mysterious noises coming from different sections of the plant. It started last week when a waste management worker swore that she had heard faint singing coming from one of the disposal chutes. Now some of the employees working on the main belt are claiming to have heard voices coming from the rafters and in the machinery. It was hard to take them seriously at first, but they're all urging that I send someone to investigate."

"Ooooh, looks like this place is haunted!" I say with a sarcastic flourishing finger gesture.

"Well, this sure is a mystery." Rajon says, trying to mask the hint of fear in his voice.

"You're scared aren't you?" I grin, "That's funny, after the incident by the fence you thought you were pretty tough. Not so brave now are you?"

Rajon blushes "Hey, I'm not scared! C'mon Sadie, let's see what the next entry says."

He flips to the next page

"I've notified the authorities about the noises. As I suspected, they didn't believe me one bit. After a thorough investigation of the plant, they found no sufficient evidence of any noises. The police brought in a toxicologist, who confirmed that some of the chemicals used in the refinery process had hallucinogenic properties. They concluded that the workers were inhaling these chemicals and were in fact imagining the

voices and singing. Now they're forcing me to shut down the plant! I can't believe that after sticking up for my employees I am rewarded with this! It's a complete embarrassment and a stain on my reputation! In fact, a news crew just came by, and they want this to be the headliner for a new section they're doing on industry corruption."

Taped to the bottom of the entry is a crumpled news clipping. The headline in big bold letters reads "Something Fishy in the Air: Fish Oil Refinery Employees Hallucinate After Being Exposed to Dangerous Chemicals."

"See," Rajon laughs nervously, "It's just a bunch of drugged up workers on a bad trip. There's absolutely nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I say.

There is nothing else of note in the office, so we leave and make our way down to the ground-level of the facility. As we thread our way through a succession of enormous metal tanks, I hear a voice that seems to echo inside of one of them.

What, you've never heard of catch and release?

Rajon and I both freeze. "What the fuck was that?" I whisper.

"I don't know," he murmurs hoarsely, "It sounded like it was coming from that tank over to your right."

I move furtively toward it and tap it with the brass finial I have been holding.

As if in response, we hear the voice again.

What're you lookin' at? And you think you've got it bad.

"Alright, that's it, I'm out," Rajon yells, "I'm getting the hell out of here."

"Wait just a minute," I reply, "I think I know what's going on."

Rajon looks puzzled. "You do?" He says.

"Just watch."

I feel around the base of the container until I find an emergency release switch. I pull it and hear a click, and a compartment at the bottom slides open. I shine my flashlight inside and pull out an antique Bubba Catfish animatronic.

Rajon's jaw hits the floor. "Wait, how'd you know it was a talking mounted fish? And how did you even know how to open that thing?"

"My grandparents had one of these things in their living room. I used to play with it all the time as a kid when I would visit. I'd recognize those phrases anywhere. And to get it open I just looked at the instructions on the side of the tank."

"Wow, so I guess the workers really were hearing voices," Rajon says in disbelief, "This must have just been some dumb prank by one of the Employees."

"Right, except it forced them to shut down the entire plant," I reply, "Do you really think they'd let it go on for that long, to the point where they lost their jobs?"

"I guess you're right, it is a little extreme," Rajon answers, "But you have to admit, it's pretty funny."

He presses a button on the plaque the fish is attached to. It begins to sing.

Take me to the river, drop me in the water,

Take me to the river, dip me in the water,

Washing me down, washing me down

Slowly other voices join in, until we are being serenaded by a sea of talking heads. The conveyor belts start to roll, and a steady stream of gyrating Bubba Catfish move toward us. The chorus swells to a thunderous level, the sound reverberating throughout the room with the acoustics of an orchestra hall. Bubba Catfish spew from the vents, burst from the tanks, and leap through the windows.

Take me to the river, drop me in the water

Dip me in the river, drop me in the water

Washing me down, washing me down,

Ooh, a-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya-ya.