

## *To Be So Dead He Sure Is Big*

PHILLIP GARDNER

Donnie Swank said, "He sure was big."

"Especially to be so dead," Ex-Ray said.

"Six-foot-eight, maybe two-fifty?"

"That's before he was dead."

"I pity the dead," Donnie said.

"I pity the pallbearers," Ex-Ray said. He stood on the bank of the Great Pee Dee River, mulching his hairy chin. "He was a biggin to start with. As swoll as he is, we'll need a frontend loader to get him ashore. How many men do you figger it'll take to get him from the hearse to the grave?"

"When I volunteered to fight fires, I didn't sign on for this," Donnie said.

"If you got some lighrer fluid, I can solve that dilemma for you, Donnie. Be like settin' a cruise ship on fire. Damn, look at the size of him. How long you reckon he's been in the water?"

"I'd say for at least seventy-five or eighty pounds," Donnie said.

"I'd call him a clay color. What color would you call him, Donnie?"

"I'd call him clay."

"Clay it is," Ex-Ray said. "What do you suppose explains why Clay's still in one piece? There's catfish that would have him limb by limb."

Donnie lit a cigarette while he considered Ex-Ray's question. "They're not biting."

"Who's not biting?" Ex-Ray said.

"The catfish," Donnie said. "They must not be biting."

"Just goes to show," Ex-Ray said.

"What?" Donnie said.

"You don't have to catch fish to go fishing," Ex-Ray said.

"Are you talking about Clay here, or are you talking about the catfish?" Donnie said.

"There aren't any catfish. You said yourself they weren't biting," Ex-Ray said.

"Lucky for old Clay here, huh?"

"Clay's luck run out."

"Damn," Donnie said. "For as big as he is, he sure is dead."

"Look at the flies," Ex-Ray said. "I hate a damned fly. With some people it's mosquitoes, with some it's gnats. Me, it's flies. Flies from Hell. Especially those big fat green ones there. Clay's head's swarming like a bee hive from Hell, ain't it? How about you, Donnie. What is it with you?"

"Snakes," Donnie said.

"Let's keep it to the insect population. What is it, flies, mosquitoes, or gnats?"

"I'd say spiders."

"Spiders, that's good."

"No, maybe fleas."

"I can stand a flea over a fly any day, especially those green blowflies. Look, I think they're making a nest in Clay's ear."

"Ticks," Donnie said.

"Oh, *hell* yeah," Ex-Ray said. "If Clay here was red, as swole as he is, he could be giant tick."

"Would we call him Tick?" Donnie said.

"No, we'd naturally call him Red."

Donnie said, "If we don't get him out of there soon, I'm not sure he's gonna come out in one piece."

"You could grab one arm, me the other. We might at least get him on shore."

"If we do that," Donnie said, "then what? Think of the flies."

"Damn, Donnie. I wish you hadn't said that. I hate a fly."

"We need a plan for getting him out of the water and into something, like the back of a pickup or something. We must exercise economy of effort," Donnie said.

"Economy of effort?" Ex-Ray said. "Where'd you learn that, *Jeopardy*?"

"I made it up," Donnie said.

Ex-Ray said, "Bullshit."

Donnie and Ex-Ray studied Clay's circumstances. Ex-Ray wagged his head from side to side. He said, "Look at the size of that hand."

"Big as a flipper," Donnie said. "You'd think he'd be tired of waving bye-bye by now."

"That's the motion of the water," Ex-Ray said.

"You got no imagination," Donnie said. "None. Nilch. Nada."

"What is that, German? Or did you just make it up in that fertile imagination of yours?"

"I'll tell you who got no imagination," Donnie said.

"Clay," Ex-Ray said.

"Damn right," Donnie said.

"Those green blowflies, they can smell a dead man from like five miles away. I saw it on the Discovery Channel."

"I don't get it," Donnie said.

"Me neither," Ex-Ray said. "Nature is a mystery to me."

"No," Donnie said. "I mean, why, if you despise flies, would you watch them on TV?"

"The whole show wasn't about flies, Donnie, just a little piece of it."

"Same difference," Donnie said. "When they started talking about flies, why didn't you turn it to the Braves game?"

"If the Braves had been playing, what makes you think I would have been watching the Discovery Channel in the first place?"

"Think Clay would have been baseball?" Donnie said.

"I'd say football."

"Or basketball. For as big as he is, he sure is dead."

"I'll wager one thing," Ex-Ray said.

"What's that?" Donnie said.

"Swimming wasn't his sport."

"You should be careful about making fun of the dead, Ex-Ray."

"I'm not making fun, I'm stating a fact."

"It's a good thing he's face down, don't you think?" Donnie said.

"Be funnier if he was face up," Ex-Ray said.

"You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Gettin' a little holy there, aren't you, Donnie?"

"We should give Clay a little dignity."

"You first," Ex-Ray said.

"What?" Donnie said.

"Fire away, Reverend. Say a few words for the recently departed."

"When the wind shifts, I'd say not so recently," Donnie said.

"You know what you are?" Ex-Ray said. "You're a hypocrite."

"I just didn't want to turn him over," Donnie said. "You don't know what the other side looks like."

"If he could talk, old Clay would tell us what the other side—that would be death—looks like," Ex-Ray said.

"Do you think it matters if you're drunk when you die?" Donnie said.

"I never thought about it," Ex-Ray said.

"Do you think Clay was drunk when he died?"

"I'd say so."

"Me, too. Got drunk, fell out of the boat. Couldn't swim, or swim drunk."

"They don't make life preservers that big, do they?"

"You mean for as big as he is, or as big as he was?"

"As big as he was."

"I don't know."

"Don't matter now. Damn he's a big one. If the bank wasn't so steep, we could back the truck up and drag him out with the wench."

"In ten years of fire fighting," Donnie said, "we haven't used that wench once. I don't even know if it works or not."

"This would be the time," Ex-Ray said.

"Does it take you longer to die the bigger you are?" Donnie said.

"That's a good question. If so, this boy's been dying for a week."

"Smells like it," Donnie said.

"Which of your senses is strongest," Ex-Ray said. "Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, or tasting?"

"I'd have to say smelling," Donnie said. "That's why I became a fireman. I can smell a fire five miles away."

"For me, it's seeing."

"That why the flies get to you so bad?"

"Maybe so."

"They say when you get older, your sight goes."

"Same true for smell?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Cause so many old people smell bad," Ex-Ray said. "Maybe they don't smell one another."

"You mean maybe they don't smell bad on purpose."

"Yeah. Like Clay here."

Donnie said, "Do you think he did it on purpose?"

"People have their own reasons for getting drunk. Or no reason at all."

"I mean do you think he may have killed himself?"

"Possible," Ex-Ray said. "But I'd do it another way."

"Drowning does seem like a awful way to die."

"Slow," Ex-Ray said. "And as it turns out for Clay, messy. Real messy."

"But the fast way is *really* messy," Donnie said. "Besides, if Clay didn't want his family to know that he was killing himself, this would be the way, don't you think?"

"Hanging. Now that's the choice of one stupid man. First it's slow and painful. And second it's messy. And third, ain't no doubt but that you killed yourself. If I ever commit suicide, Donnie, don't let me hang myself," Ex-Ray said. "I'll find some other way."

"Our choices here-," Donnie said.

"Some other way," Ex-Ray said.

"What are you talking about?" Donnie said, reaching for another cigarette, looking over at Ex-Ray. But Ex-Ray didn't answer.

Then Ex-Ray said, "Bob."

"What?" Donnie said.

"He looks more like a Bob than a Clay."

"What are you talking about?"

"That motion, up and down, and up and down."

"Why would Bob kill himself? Why would anybody?" Donnie said.

"Couldn't take it, I'd guess."

"He should of believed in Jesus."

"Yeah," Ex-Ray said. "For as dead as He is, He sure is big."

Donnie looked up at the sky. Ex-Ray studied his shoes and pulled at his chin.

"Flies don't make nests," Donnie said.

"What are you talking about," Ex-Ray said.

"A few minutes ago, you said that those flies were making a nest in Bob's ear."

"Flies lay eggs. That's what they're doing in Bob's ear."

Donnie said, "Why did you try to change your name, Ex-Ray?"

"I wanted to start over, you know. I did the crime, I did the time. I just wanted to start over."

"But you didn't start over, Ex-Ray. Ain't but one beginning, one ending."

"It's what happens in between the two that keeps me awake at night," Ex-Ray said.

"Why didn't you go somewhere where not everybody knew you?"

"I had nowhere to go."

"Maybe Bob Clay here had nowhere to go."

"I've been there," Ex-Ray said. "I've been there. That's why I'm here."

"But everybody knew you were Ray. Even after you changed you name, you were still Ray."

"You got to start somewhere, you know? Changing your name, that's a start."

"But it didn't work. You just went from being Ray to Ex-Ray."

"Sometimes you just feel desperate, you knw," Ex-Ray said.

"Yes," Donnie said.

"He sure is big to be so dead, ain't he Donnie?"

"He sure is, Ex-Ray. He sure is." □