

Blood and Dirt

By Ryan Zimmerman

Mosquitoes pricked Doyle's skin. They whined in his ears. They tickled his eyelids. It had rained that afternoon, and Doyle should have known not to go into the woods after sunset, but he had to get out here, be by himself for awhile. That's what he'd told Sheila. She always let him go when he said that.

The path that Doyle followed was hard to see in the day, almost impossible now in the dim moonlight that filtered through the trees. Even so, Doyle didn't have to pay the path much mind. He'd walked this way so often over the years that sometimes he expected to wake up some night and find that he'd sleepwalked his way to the patch of marijuana that grew at the end of the faint trail.

He walked through the pine flatwoods that radiated from the old family cabin that he and Sheila lived in, over a little clearing that his dad had called the prairie for as long as he could remember, and down into the swamp. He worried some about the cottonmouths that sometimes curled up around the cypress knees, and stomped his feet on this part of the path to warn them away. He kept to the high ground, avoided the black pools that could hide gators and snapping turtles that could take off a toe as easy as a pair of tin snips.

A rise of ground led to a hammock ringed by a thicket of vine and scrubby oak saplings. Once through the brush, the mature oaks spread out overhead, sheltering the marijuana plants underneath. Here, Doyle sat on a bare patch of ground, listened to the raucous frogsong that surrounded him, thought about what he had come here to do. Way back at the cabin, the dogs were barking, the sound traveling through the woods, over the prairie and down into the swamp, muffled by distance, softened in the humidity, to where Doyle sat under the oaks. He resolved to take action, and whatever reaction that might come from it.

When he got back to the cabin, Doyle could see his brother Ray's pick-up parked outside. That explained the dogs barking, he thought. He could see Sheila through the window talking to Ray's wife, Polly. Sheila looked like she was trying to be polite, but Doyle could see in her body language that she was tense. She held herself stiffly, back too straight to be relaxed, hands clutching a bottle of beer as opposed to gesturing freely as she sometimes did. Nevertheless, a smile played across her face. Always the hostess, Doyle thought.

He took the steps up to the front door and went inside. Ray was sitting on the couch, beer in hand, but it didn't look like it was his first of the night. "How's it goin, brother," he said. His eyes were red and he spoke slowly. Doyle had seen him like this many times over the years, and he knew that the sluggishness could be deceiving. Ray's temper lay coiled inside him like a moccasin that could strike out quickly and with little warning.

"Ray," Doyle said. "Looks like you done started without me."

"Don't be rude, little bro, say hi to Polly."

"Hi to Polly." Doyle nodded in her direction. Polly smiled in response. She was a meek woman, Doyle thought. Probably learned to lay low having to live with Ray over

the years. Hell, in private she probably was limited to yessir and nosir. This must be a vacation for the woman. Polly was hard to talk to. Not much of a conversationalist. Doyle sometimes joked with Sheila that Polly was conversationally constipated. He got a big kick out of that, but Sheila never laughed. Instead, she would just frown and tell him to stop picking on poor women.

“Where’s Ray Junior?” Doyle asked.

Polly looked to Ray before responding, gave him the chance to say if he wanted to. When he didn’t, Polly said he was staying at her sister’s.

Now Ray spoke. “Wanted to bring the little booger. Polly don’t seem to think he’s old enough yet. I say what the fuck? How old was we when Daddy took us on our first hog hunt? Six? Seven?”

“I think we was a bit older than that, Ray.” Doyle walked to the fridge, pulled out a beer.

“I still say what the fuck. Don’t want to raise a kid soft. Maybe that’s what’s wrong with you, Doyle.” Ray grinned, more like a dog showing his teeth than anything else, waiting for Doyle to take the bait.

Sheila spoke up. “Come on, boys. I can vouch that Doyle’s not soft. Least not till he’s done.”

“That woman of yours got quite a mouth on her,” Ray said.

“Don’t mind that.” Doyle gave Sheila a knowing look. “It’s just how she’s raised.”

In the night Doyle woke to the sound of barking dogs. “Shit.” He put his feet on the floor and walked out to the living room. It was dark, but he could see that Ray wasn’t on the couch where he had passed out a few hours before. He went to the extra bedroom. The door was cracked open so that he could see inside. Polly lay there on the bed alone, covered in mismatched sheets, facing the opposite wall. Doyle could hear her breathing. Slowly, she rolled toward him. Now he could see that she wore no nightclothes. The shadows of her ribs stood out in the pale light. Doyle saw her open her eyes, look right at him. She didn’t say anything. He shut the door.

When Doyle went out front, he was only wearing his boxers. He could see Ray’s silhouette over by the chain-link kennels where the dogs were so stirred up. Before going over to find out what the hell Ray was doing out here in the middle of the night, he pissed from the front steps onto the dirt in front of the cabin.

He skirted the wet spot on the ground and walked over to where Ray was. The pine duff felt damp and springy under his bare feet. He could hear Ray talking to the dogs, saying things in a low voice, but with urgency, almost like he were some kind of coach, trying to fire up his team but not wanting the other side to hear. He was calling them out by name – Dixie and Mylo; the Catahoulas, Otis the bulldog, and Hammer, the pit bull. “Come on, Dixie, we’re gonna find us a good ole hog. Hear that, Otis? Hear that, Mylo? Come on, Hammer, were gonna catch us a big motherfucker. A big motherfucker of a boar. Tusks four inches long.”

Doyle stood there and Ray went on like that for some time. Doyle didn’t know what the hell Ray was trying to do. The dogs didn’t need to get excited about going hunting. They needed their rest just like everybody else. In fact, he doubted that what Ray was saying was having any effect on the dogs whatsoever. They were just riled

because they didn't like Ray. They'd hunt for him and all, but mostly just because they liked to hunt. Leave them alone in a room with Ray, and it would be interesting to see who came out the door.

Finally, Ray looked back at Doyle. "Little brother," he said.

"The hell you tryin to do, Ray? If we had neighbors youda woke em."

"You sound like Ma. She didn't know shit, either."

Ray could always use Ma to get under Doyle's skin. He didn't know whether it was purposeful or not, but Ray was full of sharp little jabs and fond of picking at sores where Ma was concerned. Doyle had only known his mother to be loving, but she left when he was six. Ray was ten. He couldn't argue. Ray had known her better.

Thankfully, Ray steered away from the subject.

"That's the beauty of livin out here, Doyle. Raise holy hell and it ain't nobody that gives two shits. I sure wouldn't mind it, Doyle. Not one bit. But, hey. You was always the good boy. What the hell was Daddy supposed to do? It ain't like he was goin to leave the place to me where I was."

This was the same conversation they'd had over and over again. The one about Daddy drinking himself to death while Ray was locked up for cutting a guy's neck with a broken bottle. Doyle knew already how it would play out, but he always tried to avoid it anyway.

"Come off it, Ray. You know it ain't like that. Daddy was just tryin to do right by both of us. You got that money he saved up all that time."

"Yeah, but money gets spent little brother. Now look. I'm livin in some fuckin trailer park. Polly don't respect that. I can see it. She's thinkin, Ray, why don't we live in some nice house like a fuckin respectable family? You think that don't hurt? She knows it hurts. That's why she don't never say nothing when I get too mad sometimes. You ain't got them problems, little brother. Land and houses don't get spent. They just get history in em. That's what's respectable. History." Ray looked hard at Doyle. His eyes appeared clear now. Sober.

"Don't be getting all deep on me this late at night, Ray. You know I can't argue with you. You always was the smart one."

"Don't you forget it, little brother." Ray slapped Doyle on the back of the neck. Squeezed a little too hard and gave him a shake. "Don't you forget it."

Next morning Doyle lay awake in bed, just listening. The house was quiet. Birds were singing outside. He could pick out the song of a mockingbird that he knew was sitting in that old longleaf pine right out back. He heard the whistle of a red-shouldered hawk not far away. He felt Sheila roll over next to him and closed his eyes, hoping to buy a few extra minutes of silence.

"I know you're awake, so don't even pretend you can't hear me." Sheila leaned up on one elbow, smiled down at Doyle.

He opened one eye. "Now you're just talkin to spite me. I'll bet you ain't even got nothing to say."

"You should know me better than that, mister."

"O.K. What is it?"

"It's Ray. I think he's getting worse."

"I didn't know he was ever any better."

“You know what I mean, Doyle. Polly barely talks. It’s like she’s scared to death of him. And I heard the dogs last night, too. What was all that about?”

“What can I do? Ray’s family, whether we like him or not. He’s the only family I got left.” Doyle rubbed the sleep from his eyes, stretched and yawned. He meant that he was getting tired of the subject.

“All I’m saying is maybe you should talk to him, Doyle.” Sheila put his hand on her breast, clutched it there like she was trying to send him a message.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get us sorted out.” Doyle moved as if to get up out of bed, but Sheila squeezed his hand tighter to her chest. Maybe he’d just lay there another minute.

When Doyle made it out to the kitchen, Polly was sitting there at the table, knees to her chest, perching on a chair like a bird. Doyle noted that she had her clothes on. “Polly,” he said.

“Mornin, Doyle.” When Polly talked, it always sounded like someone had turned her volume down. “Made some coffee. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Hell, Polly. Mi casa es su casa.” When Polly didn’t respond, Doyle said, “Means my stuff is your stuff. Do as you like round here, don’t have to ask nobody’s permission.”

Polly frowned at this. “You’re a good man, Doyle.” She furrowed her brow, as if it were painful to say this.

“No, just family is all. Don’t go overestimatin. I’m not likely to live up to your thoughts of me.” Doyle poured himself a cup of coffee, took a sip. “You always did like it strong. This is likely to get a person movin in the morning. I’m fixin to whip up some breakfast. What’ll you have?”

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Nonsense. How’s eggs and sausage for you? Put some meat on those bones.” Doyle rummaged through the cabinets, fishing out a big skillet. Polly made no more objections, so he got some extra eggs from the fridge. “You should always fry up the meat first, sausage, bacon, whatnot. That’s the way Ma always did it. That way the eggs’ll soak up the grease when you cook em afterwards. Soak up the flavor, too.” He glanced over his shoulder at Polly, saw her looking at him. “Hell. Look at me, just ramblin. You know all this stuff. Just tell me to shut up.”

Ray emerged from the extra bedroom, crossed over to where Polly sat, put a hand on her shoulder without affection. “What are y’all two talkin about?” He looked to Doyle for the answer. “Sounds mighty friendly out here, like y’all was havin some real fine discussion.” He chuckled a little, looked down at Polly.

“You know me, Ray. Always blatherin on about something or other. Your little Polly there’s quiet as a churchmouse, but real friendly. Won’t even tell me to shut up when she knows I oughta.” Doyle put some sausage links on a plate, set the plate on the table. “Eat up, guys. Don’t wait for me.”

Polly got up, took a plate off the counter for Ray, got a fork and knife from the drawer, a napkin. She set his place at the table, loaded his plate with sausage links and returned to her seat. Doyle looked at Ray. “Like you’re king of the castle or somethin.”

“That’s how I raised her.”

After breakfast Doyle went out to the kennels to get the dogs set for the hunt. He felt optimistic about the results. He had seen pigs, and the signs of pigs all over his property. Seemed you just couldn't get rid of them if you tried. He let the four dogs out of the kennels one by one, buckling thick leather collars on Dixie and Mylo, his bay dogs, and strapping Otis and Hammer into cut vests. They were the catch dogs, the ones that did the gritty work of running in and seizing the wild boar by the ear and holding him until the situation could be reconciled in some way. Most of the time that meant the hog would be tied, taped up, brought back to a pen where its meat could sweeten up a while before slaughter. Sometimes the hog would be shot where the dogs trapped it. Doyle liked to make sure that part went quickly. Ray sometimes had other ideas.

"Hey, Doyle. Got a surprise for you." Ray called, coming out the front door of the cabin. He walked to his truck, reached into the bed, and pulled out two six-foot-long spears. Each had a wooden shaft fitted with an eighteen-inch steel spearhead.

Doyle tried not to wince. "What you got there, Ray?" He knew full well what the spears were for. He just thought he'd see what Ray had to say for himself.

"What's it look like? Boar spears, man. We're gonna do it the old time way. None of this blastin away with guns, scarin every man and beast within hearin distance. This is the way real men used to do it." Ray was grinning. He held a spear in each hand, shafts rested in the dirt at his feet, points toward the sky. His eyes ran up and down first one, then the other. He tossed one out toward Doyle, as casually as if it were a broomstick.

Doyle reached out to grab the spear, but his positioning was awkward. The end of the shaft caught on the ground and the point accelerated downward, glancing off Hammer's cut vest. "Damn, Ray." The dog scampered a few feet away. Stood glaring at Ray.

"Aw, he'll be fine. Had his vest on. No big fuckin deal. Pick up the damn spear and let's get this show on the road."

"Fuckin spears, Ray?"

"It's only for your sake it's not just knives."

Not too far from Doyle's front steps, he turned Dixie and Mylo loose. They went off, zigzagging their way into the woods, and Doyle and Ray followed, each one with a catch dog on a leash. Ray had Otis, the big bulldog, and Doyle had Hammer. Neither dog liked Ray too much, but Doyle figured Hammer probably liked him a little less after being hit with the spear.

Doyle didn't mind hog hunting. Hell, he had even supposed that he enjoyed it. What he really enjoyed, though, was just being out tramping around in the woods with his dogs. The meat for the table was nice. When he looked at Ray, he saw a whole different story. In the woods, Ray's face constricted into what Doyle thought of as a pine knot. His brows furrowed between his eyes, his mouth held tightly, lips seeming to disappear. With Ray, it was all about the kill.

Crossing the prairie, a big kingsnake slid through the grass in front of Doyle, each scale reflecting a bead of sunlight. Hammer whined, wanting to lunge at it, but Doyle held him back. He paused to watch the serpent go on its way. As he watched, Ray came up beside him with Otis. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ray take his spear by the shaft and swing it like a hatchet, the head whistling down upon the kingsnake, chopping

it neatly in half on the ground. Doyle stood and stared at where the snake writhed in two pieces, dark and gleaming against the yellow grass. He couldn't help but think it had the look of a creature surprised that its normal mode of locomotion had failed it.

Ray laughed a big belly laugh. He bent over, put his hands on his knees. Acting like he'd never seen anything so funny. Doyle just looked at him. Too mad to say anything, he marched off in the direction of the dogs past the snake, now slowing in its contortions as it bled into the dirt.

"Come on, Doyle." Ray called from somewhere behind him. "You gotta admit that was goddamned funny."

Doyle let Hammer drag him into the swamp, happy to get clear of Ray for a while. He could catch up when he caught up. Be just as fine if I didn't see that fucker for the rest of the day, he thought.

Just then, the bay dogs let loose, their barks resounding through the cypress forest. Hammer pulled harder, knowing what was to come, and Doyle had to jog behind, gripping the dog's leash in one hand, his spear in the other. He imagined what he looked like running around the woods with a spear. A damned lunatic, that's what.

Hammer took him on the straightest line to where the other dogs were making all the racket. Doyle busted through palmettos, waded creeks, not thinking much now about gators or turtles, only wanting to catch up to the chase. Finally, he caught sight of some movement through the trees. The two leopard dogs were circling a big boar. The hog was turning, trying to keep both dogs in front of him, grunting and looking for a chance to slash at the dogs with his tusks.

Hammer tugged at the lead, and Doyle had to drop his spear and hold on with both hands. He considered letting Hammer go in by himself, but it would probably be safer to wait until Ray showed up with Otis.

He stood there watching the dogs and the boar, Mylo and Dixie dancing just beyond the reach of the tusks, occasionally darting in to nip at the hog's hindquarters. The boar's eyes seemed so small in that massive head, and yet they burned with a primal hatred. Doyle had been charged before, and he had always heard horror stories of hunters getting treed for hours by an angry pig, or worse, slashed up and left to bleed in the woods. His Daddy had always told him that there wasn't nothing meaner than a big old boar, all them male juices running through his body for so many years made him gristly and ornery to the point he couldn't see straight.

Mylo danced a little too close just then, and the hog spun around and slashed wildly, catching the dog on the hindquarters and opening up a gash. The dog yelped a little and blood leaked down his leg. "Dammit, Ray," Doyle said. He looked behind him to see if he could find his brother somewhere.

The sound of the boar's high-pitched squeal, like a woman's scream, brought his attention back to the fray. As if by magic, the hog suddenly had a big white dog hanging from his ear as he thrashed and turned. Otis. What the fuck? Ray must have come in from a different direction. What the hell was he doing just letting Otis go in there alone? Doyle unclipped Hammer's leash and the dog flew in to latch onto the boar's other ear.

He looked around for Ray and found him standing stiffly by the trunk of a huge cypress tree. Ray wasn't watching the dogs, though. He was staring right at Doyle. "What the fuck, Ray?" he called.

Ray didn't answer back. Instead, he walked forward to where the dogs now had the boar's head pinned to the ground, waiting until he got within a few feet before taking his eyes off Doyle. He shifted his gaze to the boar, the dogs still moiling around, Mylo still too wound up to take notice of the cut on his hip, blood drying and matting in his fur, and lifted his spear. Brought it down with force behind the pig's shoulder, into its ribcage. The squeals increased in volume. Ray pulled the spear out. Stuck the boar again. Again. Again.

The two bay dogs, now smelling the blood, grew even more riled, danced even closer, yearning to lick the boar's wounds, roll in the blood on the ground. Mylo, in his excitement, bumped the back of Ray's knee, causing it to buckle. In a flash, Ray turned and kicked the dog hard up under its belly, lifting it off the ground. Mylo landed with a thump, tried to drag himself away, but Ray was quicker. He stabbed the dog in the back of its neck and it went limp.

"Goddamn you, Ray." Doyle walked up and looked down at his fallen dog. There was nothing he could do to help Mylo. The dog just lay there, twitching. "Why'd you have to go and do something like that?"

Ray stared back at him and Doyle thought he saw something of the boar's eyes in his own brother's face. "What's a matter, little brother? Sad you lost your pup?"

"That don't answer my question, Ray." Doyle felt his breath fast and shallow in his chest.

"I think we both know what's upset me so. I seen what you did, Doyle." Ray hefted the spear in his hand, took a step towards Doyle.

Doyle sidestepped, keeping the dead boar between him and his brother. "What are you talkin about, Ray? You must be outta your head. I ain't done nothing to upset you."

"Course not, Doyle. You was always the good boy. Wouldn't do nothing to upset no one. Not even his ex-con scum of a big brother."

"That's right, Ray. Come on. We'll get these dogs back to the house, come back with the four wheeler, pick up the hog. We'll all be eatin barbecue this evenin." Doyle wished he hadn't dropped the spear back there dealing with Hammer.

Ray continued as if he hadn't heard anything Doyle had said. "No, you would never even think of lookin at your poor brother's wife." He continued stalking Doyle around the boar, his face seeming calm, but his eyes on fire.

"Ray, come on. I ain't sniffin around your wife, if that's what you're getting at. That was an accident. I was only lookin for you. The dogs was barkin, I didn't know what was goin on." Doyle tripped over Otis, the dog still worrying the boar's ears at his feet. He sprawled on the ground, caught himself, scrambled to get back to his feet and slipped again in the dirt, now slick with blood. In that instant, Ray was over him.

"I saw what you did to our little garden."

Doyle stared back at him.

"Every one of them plants knocked down and trampled on. Might not mean much to you, brother. Means a hell of a lot to me. I got a kid to worry about. I need the money that stuff brings in. You got everything you need. You didn't want to be involved, coulda said so. I coulda left you out of it. I guess you're in it now, though." Ray spit on the ground next to Doyle's hand.

“Fuck you, Ray. That stuff is on my land. I don’t want to end up spendin time in prison over a few extra bucks.” Doyle could feel a bead of sweat running down his forehead. Felt the sting of it as it got into his eye, but tried not to blink.

“That’s right. Your land. I done forgot.” Ray reached out one hand as if to help his brother up, but still clutched the spear tightly in the other. “Come on, Doyle. We’re family.”

Doyle didn’t take Ray’s hand. Instead, he pushed himself up off the ground. Ray standing there the whole time with his hand out like a statue, wanting to make sure the gesture didn’t go unnoticed. Doyle was conscious of the dogs whining behind Ray, sniffing at the dead boar, his dead dog. “I guess it’s true what they say, then. You can’t pick your family.”

Ray lunged at him with the spear. Doyle jumped back, but was too slow. He couldn’t believe that this was happening. At least not to him. The spear point sunk an inch into his belly. He felt the blood running into the waistband of his pants. When Ray tried again, he grabbed at the spear, got it just behind the point, and didn’t let go. Ray pushed forward, grunting, his eyes narrowed, and Doyle fell back to the ground. He gasped for breath, but it wouldn’t come. The shaft of Ray’s spear slipped a little in his sweaty hands, the point inching closer to his face.

Ray started screaming. He let go of the spear. Doyle rolled away and looked up to see Hammer gripping Ray by the hamstring, shaking his whole body back and forth, but making no sound. All the sound was coming from Ray, who was swinging his fists back at the dog, but only hitting the Kevlar cut vest, doing no damage.

Doyle found Ray’s spear still in his hand. He got to his knees, and then up to his feet, breathless from the fall and lightheaded with adrenaline. He looked at Ray’s eyes. They were still furious, burning pinpricks set into his skull. He looked at Hammer, the dog still gripping and shaking, Ray’s blood on his muzzle. Dixie and Otis were barking, but keeping their distance.

Doyle stepped forward with the spear and drove it deep into Ray’s ribcage. He let go of the shaft, left the spear sticking out of his brother. Ray stopped struggling with Hammer. He fell back, landing on the dog still hanging on his leg. Hammer let go and grabbed him by the shoulder, holding Ray as if he were a pig, pinning him down. Doyle sat next to his brother. Tugged on the dog’s collar to get him to let go. Ray’s chest fluttered up and down with his breath. Blood gurgled in the back of his throat. His eyes were wide open, staring up into the cypress trees and the sky above. “Damn it, Ray,” Doyle said. He stroked his big brother’s hair for a long time after he died, after the dogs had filled their bellies on the carcass of the boar and wandered off to nap, after the sun had traveled its course long enough to drag shadows across Ray’s face, and watched as the dirt swallowed the last of the bad blood under the cypresses.

Ryan Zimmerman is a recent graduate of the MFA program at the University of South Florida. He lives in Tampa with his wife and two dogs.