NO FOREST

by Mike Wilson

Last week, last month—whenever this current lapse of gut feeling for reality started—Quarkfinder and I ran up the hill in the jeep (Two Jim, Okinawa; colonels' ghosts in the hubcaps) to his cabin midst the trees that look like an army gone AWOL.

Quarkfinder had called me at five and said, "Hey, boy, y'wanna go story-tellin'?" He was sixty years old, and the rum eurhythmic voice fit his gray mane. "Been two months. Got some fine tales. Yessir."
Since meeting him in the UCLA physics office three years ago, I'd been at his cabin a dozen times to hear him tell stories. It was Friday, and an unbegun paper was due Wednesday.

"Sure. I'm not doing anything tonight."

"I'm a-comin' with th' jeep, right ready."

"I'll drive."

Going up, every eleven or twelve minutes Quarkfinder would say something short, like a wad of gum spat out, and I'd give a standard mindless reply: "There goes a chipmunk, runnin' across the road." "Yeah, sure is."

He was sleeping in a mile-deep cave, and when he stuck his head out he told me what he saw, because I seemed to be in the cave. Everything was in the cave except the chipmunk.

Quarkfinder can't think spontaneously. On the way up he was thinking of the stories he'd tell that night: he'd run across them with oily rags on his feet until they were mirroring copper pebbles. He'd cast the gestures and the tangents he'd use like bridges between universes in geometric steel.

I parked the jeep thirty feet downhill from the cabin, facing away from it. The forest retreated around me as my driver's trance melted. I breathed a self-conscious deep breath. Quarkfinder snored.

"Wake up."

The wind played Niagara Falls in the trees.

"Are you going to wake up?"

He slept like a corpse. His jaw was open in death, head back, neck exposed. Like one of the colonels in the hubcaps.

There was a cabin key on the ring with the jeep's. I got out and walked up to the cabin (and didn't slip on the needles). Someone had laid a root beer can by the door. A gaggle of righteous save-the-wilderness-from-the-Philistines
bullshitty thoughts flew bawling up to consciousness. Another self-conscious
deep breath. The key was stuck. Pulled out a micron, it turned.

The drapes on the north and east windows were drawn. Late afternoon
sunlight jumped through the trees behind me and pushed my shadow onto the
floor. Tomblike? No—a lost room; somebody's kindergarten attic carried to
the woods.

A flashlight hung on a hook behind the door. I found the Coleman and
lit it. An attic became a pirate's den. Quarkfinder came in.

"An' how're you?" he said.

"Oh, fine. How're you?"

"Rested up. I feel like talkin'."

"Well, I feel like eatin'. I didn't have any lunch."

"Ah...well. I guess y'better have somethin' t'eat then."

"Right."

"What d'ya want?"

"What is there?"

"Hot dogs, I think."

"Sounds yummy."

I found a blanket thrown in a corner (I'd thrown it there) and used it for
a pillow. "Wake me up."

"You bet."

Thirty years ago Quarkfinder was a physicist, and an assistant professor
at Stanford. In 1915 he wrote a paper and submitted it to Physical Review,
Physics, Zeitschrift der Physik, and every other physical journal. The
paper was never published, but it became, somehow, infamous, and it made
Quarkfinder's name scandal. He was discharged from Stanford. Even when he
changed his name, no one would take him as a physicist.
Quarkfinder got drunk at the cabin a year ago; that's how I know this.

Quarkfinder tries to be the master of his world as he tells his stories; he savors control. And he doesn't want the alcohol to take credit or blame for his words. A year ago we were rained in and he ran out of stories.

He was alright Saturday and Sunday, though scared Sunday night. He slept until one on Monday and was drunk by two-thirty. Coming down Tuesday he rambled through Stanford and the paper, then felt he'd said too much, and stared at the glove compartment until I left him with his granddaughter and her husband.

"It's been a harrowing experience for him," I told then.

"Yes, yes. I can see how that could be. Poor Bertram."

"Let's get him a shower, Frank, before the kids get home."

"Thanks so much for driving him home. We do appreciate it."

"It's nothing. Poor Bertram. Bertram Quarkfinder, I caught a bus.

When I'd been counting knotholes in the ceiling for ten minutes, Quarkfinder came and got me.

"Hey, boy! Y'gonna sleep through dinner?"

"No way. Donde esta?"

"Follo' me."

He'd taken the red-rusted gas stove and set it on the flat rock behind the cabin. A pot of chili sat in the needles.

"Where are the hot dogs?"

"Guess I 'm a little wrong."

"No hot dogs?"

"Nope. But it's a fine batch o' chili. Yes sir."

I tried it.

"How d'ya like it, boy?"
"Can't tell. Taste buds cauterized."

We sat on the needles with the pot between us.

"Tonight you are gonna hear thee finest stories ol' Quarkfinder's ever told. Absolutely top-tip notch."

"Wonderful." Mouthful. "I hope my lining holds out."

"If y'gotta stomach fer a chili, y'gotta stomach fer n'tories."

"If I've got a stomach at all."

After dinner, beer-breathed and bloated, we went inside to the fireplace. He sat in the large overstuffed (losing its stuffing), I sat on the floor. I started the ritual we'd initiated the first time we'd come here, three years ago: I get a fire going, he says, "What d'ya wanna talk 'bout?" I say, "What do you have to say?" "Oh, lemme think..." (I have to think hard to know that the ritual is a ritual; we've said it so often, it cohabits with the instincts and seems spontaneous...)

"Lemme tell you—y'listenin'? There was this man—real common, seen-him-twice-never-seen-him, ordinary—an' he went fer(out some wood on th'fire; it's actin' like it's heard th'story) some wappy years without once realisin' how newsprint-plain he was. This fella—remarkable, truly, how long he went blissful ign'rant, never havin' even the tiniest chip off a revelation—knew he was plain one day and he—there any crackers?..."

My own stupid fault, he thought, for landing on an early beach. A port, a nexus for the world's commerce, to be saluted by the tugs all the way to the pier. That could have been fittin'. But a beach? With a hot dog stand so long abandoned the seagulls have repainted it?
The long kayak lay a hundred yards behind him. Its pointed prow was stuck into the sand and it looked like a conquistador's flag. I claim this land. The water bags had been emptied at noon. The food was finished two days ago. Harvey Fulton looked at the moon and thought: twelve waters without hour.

My own fault. Abandoned beach. Should've landed near a party. Headline: MAN CROSSES OCEAN IN KAYAK, CRASHES BEER BUST.

And no money. No: two dollars. Enough to call. Hello, Am. I'm home.
Yes, I did it by myself. The whole Pacific, "Darling, you must look... don't fret, dear. How are the kids? No, no shells. Could you come get me? I'm in San..."

The sandal-worn path leading to the street was seventy yards away. He thought of water, of stumbling over a six-pack.

...collapse on the beach from dehydration, so passersby can tell the police about the hobo on the sand. 'Get movin', buddy.' 'I think he's dead, Sarge.' Write-up in the press: MAN CROSSES OCEAN IN KAYAK, IT'S INCHES FROM SUCCESS.

He climbed the path to the street and his legs screamed. He looked at the stars. They seemed to be motes of ice.


Goddamn. All the way. From Singapore to San whatever. And me nothing. Now something. Why did you decide to cross the Pacific alone? 'Well, I...'


At the top of the path he saw a Safeway two blocks off and walked toward it. His waterlogged shoes slipped on and off.

'Well, if you wanna know the truth, what nearly finished me off was... comin' up that trail off the beach at the end.' Laughter.
A microsecond before he opened the door he remembered he looked like a thousand-year-old leper. He was exhausted and egotistical (made it, made it) and he decided he didn't care how he looked (or smelled).

The store seemed (unreal) like an old dream he'd lost in the night (déjà vu). He filled the kiddie seat of a cart with a gallon and a half of soda pop. The checkout girl's smile was pathetically phony. Honesty of the salt.

"You havin' a party somewhere?" she asked.

"No. Just crossed the Pacific in a kayak."

She laughed. "Suure y'did."

"I did. Honestly."

"Sure. That's a dollar-fifty. Out of two."

"Don't you believe me?"

"There's one-fifty, seventy-five, and two. What?"

"I've got the kayak to prove it."

"Prove what?" She put the bottles into a bag.

"I crossed the Pacific alone. In a kayak. I can take you to see the kayak."

"I believe you, okay?"

"You don't believe me. Shit. Well, you don't have to believe me."

"Good night," she called, "and thank you for shopping at Safeway!"

She didn't... crossed it! Crossed it! But she didn't... no.

Only one person. Can't be petty when I've crossed the ocean.

He sat in the parking lot and drank the pop under the arc lights. It was going to be funny later, he thought. Yeah, and the first soul I told thought I was dumb crazy!

A half-gallon filled him. The phone booth across the lot reminded him of calling home.
Hello, Ann. Get up. Call.

He set the bottles on the floor of the booth and tried to call. His first dime missed the slot and fell into the hungry darkness.

"Uh-uh-where is it?" he whispered. Nervous. Shitless. Another dime was pulled from his pocket. He put it in very slowly and dialed 0.

"Operator."

"Hello. I'd like to make a collect call to anyone at 213-370-4672."

"Who shall I say is calling, sir?"

"Harvey Fulton."

He danced in the booth. Suddenly his bladder was full.

"Operator..."

"Just a moment, sir."

A short time passed. He thought of opening the booth doors and pissing onto the blacktop.

Oh, gotta go.

Would the operator believe if I told her? Better not to try.

The other phone rang twice.

"Hi." Cindy.

"I have a collect call for anyone from a Mr. Harvey Fulton. Will you accept charges?"

"Umm...wait." Bang, clunk. On the coffee table. Wait?

A dim loud voice called:"Mom! It's Dad! Should we accept the charges?"

A great-voiced phantom replied:"Oh...go ahead."

Cindy:"Sure."

"Go ahead, sir."

"Hi, Cindy."

"Hello, Dad. Where are you?"
"I'm in San... um... I don't know. I'm in the parking lot of some Safeway. By the sea."

"There've you been?"

"Yes, we haven't heard from you for three months." Ann.

He laughed. "Oh, I've been carrying on with all those women that adore me so."

"Uh-huh?" Cindy said.

"Honestly. They're all in tahiti."

Ann asked, "There are you, Harv?" Lired voice. Angry-touched?

"I don't know, dear."

Cindy asked, "There are you, really?"

"I don't know, really. I haven't asked anyone yet."


"I just landed."

"Landed?"

"Just finished the trip. In the kayak."

"What trip?"

He heard the question and shuddered, then wet his pants. The warm urine drenched his shorts; it ran down his legs in streamers of heat.

"Crossed it. For real. Got the kayak and log. What trip? Joke, joke."

...but I didn't think it was very funny at the time!

"The trip. Across the Pacific in the kayak!"

"What trip is that?" Cindy asked.

"This isn't very funny," he said.

"We've been living on the insurance since May. Where'd you go?" Ann asked.

"I told you about it." At least, remember: one time, two times.
"About what?"

"About crossing the ocean. Told you at least a dozen times."

"What's he talking about?" Cindy asked.

"Sure are you, "arv?"

"I'm at—hold on," he read the phone, "fourteen-twelve north Norman Avenue, San Luis Obispo. Could you come get me?"

"Why don't you come here?" Spite.

"You've got the car. I don't have any money."

"Neither do we. Hang up, Cindy." K'lik.

"Where've you been?" Ann asked.

"I've really been crossing the ocean. Please..."

"Christ." K'lik.

The booth stank. He let the receiver hang and picked up the bottles; in bending down he cried. He pushed back the door and left the booth, crying.

Girl, daughter, wife: something now nothing.

Headline: MAN CLAIMS TO CROSS OCEAN IN KAYAK, MEETS SKEPTICISM.

I'll call the papers; they'll get me a room. Give a copyboy his first story: and the next day I was made a cub reporter.

The piss-soaked bag stained his shirt under the streetlamps' flaming hollow bulbs. He shuffled to the beach.

The distant sea was a prairie of diamonds. Halfway to where he'd landed he thought: I should see the boat silhouetted.

"Has it fallen?" he whispered, dropping the bottles and running, knowing for real what had happened as he ran.

Stolen to sea.

Ten feet from where he'd planted the kayak the water chilled his thighs.

The tide can't come and go that fast!
An arrow danced beyond the breakers.


Never.

When I woke up Monday morning it was raining bronze-tipped arrows.

Quarkfinder was already awake, in his overstuffed throne.

"Sounds like it's raining," I said. There was a long silence.

"Yep," he looked at me, then lowered his gaze to his knees.

"How are the roads?"

"Don't know. Lissen."

The rain rattled on the roof like seeds in a box.

"I guess we're stuck here," I said.

"Yep, guess so."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Nope.

"This ain't th' first time I been caught without a story."

I pushed the sleeping bag down to my feet and stood up with a horse-

comly, lying, smile on. "Where's coffee?"

"In th' pantry."


He raised his head like a storyteller and said, "Last time I was caught

with no stories I think I told ya 'bout th' paper I wrote 'bout thirty

years ago, an' how 'cause of it, I ain't been a physicist since then.

"Guess I'll tell ya what th' paper said, jest t' fill time."

"You don't have..."

"More. I oughta tell ya. Jest t' fill time."

I was thinking: you've told me stories to get my respect and love; you

don't have to tell any more. You don't have to. He said:
"Thirty years ago, when I was at Stanford, I went t'workin' with a group that was studyin' element'ry particles. They were tryin' t'tie all th'element'ry particles t'gether into some kinda periodic table, like they have with th'elements. There were a slew o' particles—still are—an' sometimes there're patterns an' symmetries an' sometimes there ain't. They—we—were goin' at puttin' this mess into some order in our heads so we could define th'particles an' their behavior with numb'rs an' equations, or weegee boards, or pointed rocks, or anythin': just some consistent system. They still ain't done it. They never will. I proved it."

"What?"

"That's m'paper, Miller's theorem."

Bertram Miller.

"There's a thin' in physics called th'Uncertainty Principle. It says: y'can nevr know, fer exactly, where anythin' is an' where an' how fast it's movin' at th'same time. 'Ts'impossible. An' there's a thin' in math called Goedel's Proof," he pronounced the "oe" perfectly, "an' it says, if y'got a math'matical system, like algebra or 'rithmetic, y'can't prove fer certain if that system is self-consistent. Ever. 'Ts'impossible.

"I took both o' those an' generalized 'em, then checked m'generalizations 'bout a thousand times, an' reworked m'theorem from seven ways; each time I proved th'same thin': if matter an' energy exist, then matter an' energy don' exist."

"What?" I was still standing.

"I found th'ultimate physical law: there ain't no physical law. I mean, there's nothin' holdin' th'universe t'gether, ultimately. Nothin'. Ev'ry new-fangled theory comin' along is so much horseshit, 'cause if it's true it's false. I don' know how that's true, but it's true."
"What do you mean?" I didn't understand. I felt shocked.

"Th'Universe is a physical contradiction. Don' ya see? Ev'ryone who's lookin' for th'physical laws that're at th'bottom of the world is lookin' for somethin' that ain't there. Down where it starts—in th'nucleus—there ain't nothin', no law squeezin' out the world."

I understood. "Then what about gravit..."

"We're so big that we can't see all them particles are goin' their own ways, we just see big patterns—we can't see the rough edges.

"An' everyone knew it was true when I proved it. But they're still lookin'—pretendin' t'look—for th' little laws. Still lookin'; it's chasin' th'wind."

"Then what runs the world?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Elves?"

Two years later he died. I read somewhere a physicist say the trouble with particle physics was its bulk of unordered data: "We can't see the forest for the trees." Quarkfinder knew.

There is no forest, there are only trees.