

Incident at Robinson Lake

by
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Christopher D. Ochs

The westerly wind sighed across the single-lane road, the scent of spruce shouldering that of the wildflowers aside. Virgil Crittenden took a deep breath of the morning air and smiled at the trees encircling the ranger station's parking lot. Gnarled and stunted from decades of off-and-on drought and sulfur-tainted soil, they were the perfect sanctuary for his elusive game.

Richard Pinnock stepped tentatively out of their Range Rover, arched his back, and groaned. "That's the last night I sleep on an air mattress. My back can't take roughing it. Give me a tour-guided safari followed by an evening of G&T's back at a Hilton anytime."

"You've been hunched over your lawyer's desk too much," said Virgil with avuncular patience. "You should get out more often."

"Yes, Mr. Crittenden," said Richard, like an annoyed butler.

"Please, just 'Virgil.' Use that mental compartmentalization that we attorneys are infamous for, and forget that you're in competition for a partnership at Crittenden & Jacobs."

"All right... Virgil."

"No position or titles today. We are merely two men in the wild, enjoying what Nature deems to show us." Virgil put on his Booner hat, folding its brim above his eyes. Slinging a rucksack over one shoulder and a Nikon SLR camera around his neck, he sauntered toward the split-wood ranch-style ranger station. He mumbled to himself, "...and what natures are likewise uncovered."

Donning his Mets cap and a fishing knife, Richard sprayed insect

repellent on his arms. Trailing behind Virgil, he fidgeted on his cell phone. “I hoped the station would have public Wi-Fi.” Disgust tainted his words.

Virgil chuckled to himself, with a disappointed shake of his head. Reaching the door, he strode into the office.

A bell jangled cheerily over a radio playing a forlorn country ballad. A uniformed ranger emerged from the back office, beaming like the happenstance of a visitor made his entire day. “Welcome to Yellowstone Bechler Station, sir. I’m Gordy. How can I help you...” Richard stomped into the reception area, his frustration still raining down on his phone. “... both?”

“Good morning, Ranger Gordy,” said Virgil with boyish innocence. He pulled out his wallet as he spoke. “We’re hoping to photograph local wildlife, particularly one of the avian species making their habitat here.”

“You’re in luck.” Gordy pulled out two brochures from under the counter. “Whooping cranes are migrating through the area, and our bald eagles have made a strong comeback.”

Virgil held up one hand to refuse the tourist info, showing him instead his membership card to the National Audubon Society. “I’m here for a challenge—the blue-headed vireo.” Richard remained oblivious, stuffing his phone back in a pocket of his khaki cargo shorts.

The ranger furrowed his brow. “Those are far more plentiful northeast of here, like in the Dakotas.”

“Quite so,” Virgil said with a quick grin. “But I’m here to gather evidence of a possible new sub-species of the Vireo. A decade ago, I spotted one in this vicinity with a blazing blue crest, far more brilliant than that of the Blue-headed. I was caught off guard then.” He held up his Nikon with pride. “This time I’m loaded for bear, if I can mix metaphors.”

“Sounds like you’re all prepared,” said Gordy. “So, how do you require my help?”

“I’d like to set up my cameras around Robinson Lake. The only route I can find is to follow Rock Creek upstream from the station road for three and a half miles. Is there an easier route not shown on maps?”

“You might see the occasional footpath along the road, but we’d

rather you not use them. We ask park visitors use only clearly marked paths, like that along Rock Creek.”

Virgil replied with a pout. “I see.” Turning to Richard, he clapped him on the back and said, “Well, Rock Creek it must be. Hope your hiking boots fit well.” Richard returned a frown in silence.

Virgil drove the SUV southwest along the station’s service road, while Richard stared out the passenger window at fir-dotted plains sloping upward to the north. He was startled out of his mope by the dashboard GPS.

“Welcome to Idaho,” it chimed gleefully.

Virgil peered into the forest brightly lit by the morning sun, slowing down after the ranger station disappeared behind a curve. Less than a mile later, he pulled the vehicle to the side of the road, stopping near a worn triangular depression leading into the scrub and trees. “I knew I had spotted a path around here,” he said with satisfaction. “It should only be a mile to Robinson Lake, as the crow flies.”

“Didn’t the ranger tell us not to use unmarked footpaths?”

“Indeed. However, it was only a simple request. There is good reason he could not frame it as an order.”

“Why’s that?”

“People v. Belderrain, U.S. Federal court, Wyoming District.” Out of habit, Virgil’s voice slipped into his courtroom demeanor. “Due to a unique intersection of geography, state and federal laws combined with 6th Amendment, the next two miles due west, from here up to Montana are a ‘get out of jail free’ zone. In some circles, it has earned the outlandish moniker of ‘The Zone of Death.’ Even if the Park Service decided to cite us, I doubt if a federal district judge could be bothered to wade into untested legal waters over two scofflaws. Especially when the defendants are two lawyers from a prestigious law firm.”

“Yeah... I recall this being one of my Constitutional law professor’s favorite loophole cases. Belderrain had inadvertently crossed into this area and bagged an elk on Yellowstone land. He took a reduced plea, as it was cheaper than taking it to court.”

With a chuckle, the cordial Virgil returned. “That’s the one.” He

hefted two rectangular carrying cases in either hand. “Now grab my largest black case, if you would, please. We’re burning daylight, and we have a mile to trek, not to mention a lot of equipment to set up.”

It was heavy work, lugging the suitcase in addition to the weight of Richard’s own backpack. A steady breeze of fresh pine kept most of the sweat off his brow. Trying to ignore a pair of legs burning from overuse, he managed, “I didn’t figure you for a birdwatcher. How long have you had this hobby?”

“Oh, for quite a while.” Virgil forged ahead, sniffing out where the faint trail led. “I was bitten by the bug in my teens. I was taking a portrait of my then-girlfriend by a Florida lakeside, when a snowy egret walked out of the reedy shallows into the shot.”

“Was the young lady destined to be Mrs. Crittenden?”

“Heh, no! That southern belle of my salad days took great offense that my attentions were on the egret rather than her for the rest of the afternoon.” Virgil set the larger of his cases into the high reeds. “Here we are.”

A marshy swamp lay before the pair. Green and quiet as a library, its surface was disturbed only by the occasional fish snatching down an insect. At the center of the pool emerged a small wet mound of dirt, stone, and detritus, all laced with fronds of dead aquatic vegetation. Along its shore lay the dilapidated bones of a small canoe.

“Oh my, the lake’s shrank quite a bit since I was here last.” Virgil scratched the top of his head through his hat. “I hope it doesn’t likewise reduce the chances of sighting my vireo again.”

Richard plunked down his cases into the soft soil, unsnapped a water bottle from his backpack, and took a long draught. A loud exhale of a thirst refreshed, and Richard unslashed a small folding chair from the large case.

“Do be quiet, Richard. Loud noises are what we do not need.”

Richard saluted with his water bottle and took out his cellphone. After huffing onto its tiny lens, he wiped off the condensation with a sleeve.

Virgil opened the oversized case and pulled out a camera body, a

black cube half the size of a car battery with every face laden with rings, apertures, and levers of steel.

Richard stood and gawked at the device. “What is that?”

“A Hasselblad 503C/M, the best camera ever made. It’s a sad commentary that in the mad rush to digitize everything, this model has long since been discontinued.” From out of the black form-fitting foam, he pulled out a monopod stand. After mounting the two together, he balanced the contraption with one hand onto the dry grassland while selecting a lens with the other. He settled on a gigantic white telephoto, with a lens the size of a Blu-ray disc.

Richard watched the assembly ritual in silence, his widening eyes filled with bewilderment. He grimaced sheepishly at his phone.

Lastly, Virgil selected from a line of loaded film packs and slapped one on the back of the hefty camera.

“You’re using film?” Richard’s mouth debated with itself whether or not to smirk. He wagged his phone in the air. “Why not just store the pictures in memory?”

“Electronic photography is indeed impressive.” Virgil unfolded his own chair and sat down, setting his rucksack next to it. Nuzzling his eye against the viewfinder, he scanned the far shore of the lake. “However, the saturation and brightness zones imposed by digital media absolutely ruin any print. Besides, electronics lack the romanticism that film affords.”

Richard’s eyes glinted with something between envy and avarice. “Quite a sophisticated setup, one that would rival that of a National Geographic photographer.”

“I’ve contributed photos to a few issues. My best have appeared in Nature.”

“I didn’t think a birdwatcher needed more than a pair of binoculars and a notebook.”

“I prefer the term ‘twitcher.’ Our type of ornithologist look only for the rarest species of birds.”

Richard’s effusive tone vanished, his voice acquiring a humorless, biting edge. “All this must’ve cost a pretty penny.”

Virgil paused to regard the younger man, who had dug out the most

expensive item from the case's collection. Richard's face wore an expression Virgil had rarely seen outside of court. Crittenden raised a cautionary hand. "Please do not mishandle that macro lens, it's quite delicate."

"I'm sure you could find the necessary funds to cover most any unexpected expenditure. You see, I've learned quite a bit about forensic accounting at C&J over my tenure. Like how a portion of everyone's billable hours go to a charitable fund. Turns out it's a series of shell corporations hiding a certain account in the Cayman Islands. Yours, I suppose?"

"Ah," Virgil sighed. "Yes, Mrs. Crittenden and I have become quite accustomed to the trappings of success." He reached into his rucksack.

"Careful..." Richard leaned forward threateningly, his hand pulling out his fishing knife.

Still sitting in Richard's shadow, Crittenden's momentary surprise curled into a wary smile. "I think I now understand why your competitors for promotion took unexpected leaves from C&J. Should we add blackmail to your list of talents?" He produced a gray cloth, draped it over the camera and lens, and planted the monopod deep in the loamy soil.

Richard lightened his looming stance. "Since you earlier mentioned *People v. Belderrain*, I don't have to explain why this is the perfect time and place to... negotiate my partnership."

"What terms do you suggest?" Crittenden delved into his rucksack, this time producing a tobacco pouch and a Meerschaum pipe carved in the shape of a snipe's head, its long stabbing bill forming the ebony mouthpiece. He gestured toward Richard's chair a few steps away, then proceeded to methodically fill the pipe.

Richard sat, wide-legged in his folding chair, steepling his hands. "Oh, nothing that should surprise you. A corner office and a full partnership immediately. Eventually, my name added to the firm's. In between yours and the dear departed Mr. Jacobs Esq., after a believable amount of time. Say three months?"

Crittenden leisurely crossed his knees and patted his pockets,

searching. “I believe that can be arranged. Anything else?” Another search in the rucksack, and he pulled out a gold plated lighter. He ceremoniously lit his pipe, and the aroma of toasted champagne filled the air. Exchanging the lighter for a flask, Virgil lifted it to his blackmailer. “No? Then shall we drink to it? I apologize for the lack of glasses—I had not originally intended to share.”

“By all means. You first.”

“Salud.” Virgil took a healthy draught, swished it around his tongue, inhaled through whistling lips, and swallowed. “I hope you can appreciate 1858 Croizet cognac.” He tossed the flask to Richard, who caught it and swirled its contents, inhaling the vapors.

Richard likewise aerated his swig, swallowed, and grinned victoriously at clouds crawling across the sky. He refocused on Crittenden, who wore a vacant expression, and held a gun angled down at a shallow angle.

Its suppressor spat out two puffs.

Richard’s kneecaps exploded in clouds of red spray. His screams were baffled by the plains grasses and tall reeds that seemed to recoil from the violence.

Crittenden ambled over to Richard, whose repressed cries of agony keened through clenched jaws as he rolled, holding his shattered knees. Richard’s eyes stabbed impotent death wishes at Crittenden.

“You needn’t have resorted to such distasteful tactics, Richard. You were already in the lead for the partnership. Your knowledge of *People v. Belderrain* was exemplary, and I expected no less from you. However, let me enlighten you about a similar case—*People v. Crittenden*.”

Richard ceased his caterwauling, staring intensely through ragged foaming breaths.

“You’ll find it in no legal journal—the District of Wyoming has seen to that. The court transcripts are likely buried in some mildewed basement. You see, I had been detained for the murder of poor Mr. Jacobs, their theory of the crime being that we had an argument, accusing each other of embezzlement, followed by an altercation. Throughout, I maintained he had drowned in an unfortunate canoeing accident.”

Crittenden pointed his pistol lazily at the heap of rusting metal half-submerged in the tiny lake. “But unlike Belderrain, I did not plead out. Instead, I detailed the countless headaches that a drawn-out and well-publicized court battle would create. Every ne’er-do-well in the country would be drawn to this patch of Idaho to commit countless crimes, once it became common knowledge that even murder had no consequences here.”

Richard summoned his strength and yelled for help.

“Help is over a mile away, and cannot hear you. I am indeed sorry it has come to this, Richard. I saw a bright future in you.” He aimed his gun at Richard’s forehead. “Goodbye.”

Crittenden’s gun pronounced its sentence.

A timid whistle sounded behind Virgil. He whirled about, his aim seeking out the source.

A brown vireo, with a crest of glittering cerulean sat on the tip of the old canoe. It sprang away, fluttering directly to the farthest copse of trees.

Virgil’s shoulders fell. “Bother.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher D. Ochs dove headfirst into speculative fiction with his epic fantasy *Pindlebryth of Lenland*. His short stories have been published in the *GLVWG* and award-winning *BWG* anthologies and websites, and by *Firebringer Press*. Using his skills learned with the *LVS*, he crafted a collection of mirthful macabre short stories, *If I Can't Sleep, You Can't Sleep*. His latest novel is a gritty urban fantasy/horror, *My Friend Jackson*, a Finalist in *Indies Today's* Best Books of 2020.

His current projects include: the cosmic adventures of the world's most dangerous insurance agent in Eldritch, Inc.; a sci-fi/horror novel *Sentinel of Eternity*; a prequel novella and a second novel in the *Pindlebryth* saga.

Chris has too many interests for his own damn good. With previous careers in physics, electrical engineering and software, CGI animator, classical organist, voice talent on radio, DVD and OTAKON[®], it's a wonder he can remember to pay the dog and feed his bills.

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