

They're blowing through the outskirts in his father's car. The alignment is shot to hell and the steering wheel buzzes so bad, Cole Howland has to jam his kneecap under the shaft to keep the Buick from veering into a ditch. Lily squirms in the back seat, jostling for a better look at the cows. Beyond the windshield, the sky is a trout's belly spackled with cirrus clouds. Billboards flash ads for cheap housing developments, car dealerships and gun shops, ads for retirement communities whose names boast of the very utopias their golf courses have helped eviscerate. Fairview. Tierra Linda. Alta Vista.

"Are we lost?" Lily says as they pass a browning field of piebald heifers.

"Of course not. This here's the scenic route." Cole shakes his head at the honeycomb subdivisions, gated entrances with dancing, multicolored balloons. He's driving her to the ravine where his favorite musician, Hal Torrence, once composed a pastoral tune praising the countryside and lamenting the city sprawl. "From what I can see," Cole says, "looks like his worst fears have come to true. Few months from now, there won't be any country left." The backroad takes them farther south. The new houses momentarily give way to more farmland.

"What about the cows? Where will they go?"

"Somebody will take them, I'm sure."

Corn stalks poke up in measured rows. From beneath the dead pecan leaves, broomweed and green-eyed daisies have burst into color. They're tearing through land shackled by ballast and railroad ties, land divided by barbed-wire fences and taller game-proof fences where oil-company execs used to fly around in private choppers with Ruger semiautomatics, mowing down oryx, rag stag, and mouflon. Nothing belongs here anymore, Cole thinks. Not even the cows.

"Will they go to the people who took Ludwig?" Lily says.

Cole tenses. Ludwig was her English bulldog. Her mother found him in the neighbor's pool. Drowned. How he got there, nobody knows, but his stubby legs couldn't paddle, his head was too big to keep his small body afloat. Suzette wanted to tell her the truth, but Lily had a recital coming up. How would the humoresques he'd selected for her to play sound in the hands of a kid who'd just learned her poor little Ludwig had suffered a slow, terrible death?

"You know, I believe they *will* join Ludwig at the farm."

"The big farm in the east?"

He lets out a breath. "Sure, you bet."

Half an hour later, they leave the Buick in the parking lot, grab a couple of brochures at the Discovery Center, and hike the main trail to Devil's Creek. Cole shows Lily where to find the smooth pieces of limestone that don't break apart in your hands when you lift them. The rocks lie along the shore in sandbanks, inches beneath the clear water.

"What'd I tell you?" He scoops one up and sidearms it across the bend. The rock hops three times. Three ringlets startle the surface. In a shaded cove on the far side, a mosquito cloud lifts and thins out. "Isn't this place cool?"

"It's okay." Her knees are bent and she sticks her tongue out. She mimics his stance but squeezes her rock too hard, thinks too long. When she lets the rock fly, it hits a cypress branch overhead and plunks into the shallows at her feet. A wild, puny toss.

“It’s all right,” he says. “Hal Torrence didn’t skip rocks till he was ten.”

Lily shrugs. “When am I gonna play his music?”

“Soon.” She has no idea what she’s getting into, Cole thinks, but there’s no need to alarm her about the technical difficulties of Hal Torrence’s songs. “Don’t want to rush into it.”

“When am I gonna be ready?”

“Patience, kid. I’ll let you know.”

“What’d he do here,” she says, “besides throw rocks?”

“Walk around mostly. He’d have his sketchbook out. Write ideas for songs. You got yourself a sketchbook, don’t you?”

She shakes her head.

“Ask your ma to buy you one. You’ll need to pin down those melodies”—he taps his left temple—“while they’re still buzzing around.”

Lily twirls and stomps. She’s a twig of a gal, nine come November, with short pale legs and big owlsh eyes. Mud slides up around her sandals and splatters her ankles. In navy shorts, argyle vest over a white T-shirt, and huaraches with shreds of grass trapped in the side buckles, she’s not exactly dressed for a hike, but she threw on what her ma left out for her on the bed, and Cole didn’t want to make a fuss.

“I used to think my dad was a pirate.” Lily looks up at him. “That’s not true, is it?”

“Course not. What d’you think he is now?”

“Engineer.” She nods. “Bet you he’s an electrical engineer.”

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They leave Devil’s Creek, scramble up a steep bank, and follow the path to a footbridge. Someone has placed a lost key on one of the cedar posts. Behind them, cyclists have cut trails in the dirt with their mountain bikes.

Lily grabs the key off the post. “What were you and Mom arguing about last night?”

Cole sighs. “Grown-up stuff. Nothing for you to worry about.”

Recently he’d returned from a month-long tour with Jimmy Fletcher’s band, gigging in New York and Boston, and they’d spent an extra week in the Berkshires playing for this Russian tycoon who wanted to entertain business clients in his hilltop villa. The money was good, the music was good, the drinks were good. But Suzette had come to resent his absence. She really let him have it last night for staying gone so long.

Cole takes the key from Lily and sets it back on the post. “When your ma and I haven’t seen each other for a while, it takes some time for us to find our groove.”

A few trees along the main trail are painted with red dots for a scavenger hunt. Arrows chalked onto the foot-path point the way to buried treasure.

Lily drops a stick off the bridge, and it sails down through the air and floats on the current. They veer from the trail and pass clumps of prickly pear and uprooted oaks. Floods sweep through every now and then and leave tangles of branches with city garbage hanging from them like ornaments. Grocery bags, six-pack yokes, polystyrene cups, plastic bottles. You can see the floodline, four or five feet high, on the trunks of elms that grow out of the creek bed.

At the bottom of a narrow slope, they reach a sinkhole in the limestone. Cole picks Lily up from under her shoulders and sets her down on the other side, and then he jumps over himself, kicking in the gravel with his heel, an old habit. He hears a rustling as the gravel vanishes into the hole. When he looks up, Lily’s staring at him. The sunlight on her argyle-sweater vest brings out the amber flecks in her eyes. Sometimes, depending on the light or what she’s wearing, her eyes appear yellowish or hazel. Today they’re the color of new pennies.

He guides her past a mesquite shrub bristling with thorns. “Don’t want to step there.”

When they return to the water’s edge, Lily goes looking for another stone to throw. She loves the outdoors. She

doesn't mind getting her knees dirty or her legs speckled with mud. Sometimes in the park near their apartment, she'll dig out an ant or pill bug and feed it to a spider by dropping the sucker into the web. The spider will crawl out from its hiding place to inject its poison and spin its web around the stunned prey, sheathing it in a silk cocoon.

Cole's poison is a flask of Wild Turkey he carries in his hip pocket, taking a sip every now and then, enjoying the sour taste on his chapped lips, the warmth blooming in his chest.

"What's in there?" Lily says after he's taken a long pull. "Didn't Mom say you weren't supposed to drink alcohol?"

"You're right." He puts the flask in his pocket. "Let's keep walking."

They venture farther into the ravine. Lily drags the toe of her sandal through the mud, nudging pebbles into the water, then turns to make sure he's still following her. She seems to be chewing over something in her mind. Finally, she stops at a narrow turn where someone has built a crossing with three flat stones. "You and Mom gonna call it quits?"

He feels a catch in his throat. "Course not."

"If you do, can I come live with you?"

"Won't have to. I'm staying put."

Her eyes catch him again, focused in the ravine's filtered light.

"Hey, kid. Don't go thinking it's got anything to do with you."

"I know."

They return to the creek and follow the water's edge toward the old mill. Used to be a ranch house by the mill. Cow trails still lead from a barbed-wired fence down to the water, but the cattle and house are long gone. What remains is a stone foundation half swallowed by undergrowth. A longhorn skull lies in the center, sun-bleached, with small rocks piled around it.

Live oaks and ashe junipers, what they call "cedar" in this part of the state, cast a mottled shade over the banks.

Lily's tipping over a large stone that looks more like a chunk of concrete, maybe part of the foundation that has gotten washed off—it has pebbles and glass caked to its underside—when a cottonmouth shoots out of the creek, slides through the mud, and comes to rest between her feet, under the rock she's lifted.

“Don't you move, Lily.”

He struggles to keep his voice calm though his heart is already clocking in his chest. Lily usually does as she's told. Smart girl. She's been out in the woods so many times, camping and hiking in the hill country. Doesn't startle easily.

She freezes with her leg in the air, knee bent, the toe of her huarache still holding the rock, its shadow covering the cottonmouth. The snake's oily black, maybe three feet, much thicker and nastier than your average bullsnake.

“What kind is it?”

He tells her. The snake lies beneath the rock, not yet taking up its defensive coil. Long as she doesn't startle it, he can grab her. “I'm coming to you.”

He's heard cottonmouths are shy and will strike only if threatened but that kind of logic doesn't mean squat when you got one between your legs. That rock, though, coming down on its head. Shit. Either Mr. Cottonmouth will continue on its way or bite Lily's ankle. Send her over to Methodist, assuming they have the antivenom in stock. What he hasn't counted on is for the fucker to stay put. Like it owns that piece of shade. Like it's saying, “This here's my territory. You make your move.”

“Can't hold it,” Lily says. “Rock's getting heavy.”

“Don't drop it. Wait for me.”

He crawls along the trail until he's about three feet from where she stands, her knee bent, foot trembling. He says, “All right. Here's what we're gonna do. I'm gonna count to three—” And he points to a patch of crabgrass behind her that looks soft enough. “On three,” he says. “I'll grab you, and we'll jump.”

“I'm scared.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Her foot is shaking bad. The tears are welling in her eyes. Silently, the cottonmouth draws in its tail and curls beside her ankle. He still can’t see the head, whether it’s moving, but he bends his knees and holds his arms out.

He jumps and catches her, and they fall hard against the crabgrass. The concrete hits the ground with a dull thud, and when he turns the snake is gaping at them, its mouth pink-white behind a pair of needle fangs. Cole draws Lily’s legs up into his arms to shield her. The cottonmouth uncoils, slithers through the mud, and slips silently into the creek.

They scramble up the embankment and in the first clearing he checks her legs for bite marks, even though he knows she’d be hollering bloody murder if the snake had bitten her. On the footbridge, he brushes the dirt off her shorts and knees. He dries her tears with his thumbs.

She says, “Were we almost dead?” Her chest rises and falls with dry sobs.

“Nah, we were all right.” His hands are shaking as he uncaps his flask and takes a long sip. “But maybe we don’t tell your ma about the snake.”

Lily nods, sniffing. “She would totally flip.”

Later, after she’s calm, Lily finds another stick and drops it over the rail. From the bridge, they watch the stick hit the water, bob to the surface, and float away.

About the Author



David Norman is a native of San Antonio, Texas. His short fiction has appeared in *Euphony*, *Image*, *Descant*, *Gulf Stream*, *American Literary Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Ledge*, *Rio Grande Review*, and other publications. He earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Texas State University and his MA in Humanities from New York University. He plays the piano and has taught university courses in writing and professional editing for over ten years. Learn more about him at www.davidnorman.com.