

New Fiction by Dwight Curtis: Yacht Master



I'm all alone, floating down the Clark Fork in the middle of the night. I have a pepperoni pizza bungeed to the rear seat

and the moon is so bright that my oars cast shadows on the water. The surface of the river is chopped up into white and black. It feels like I'm in a graphic novel. I've never done this before.

My good friend William was going to come with me but at the last minute decided to get some sleep. I have a sandwich bag full of eight-dollar mouse patterns that I bought at the Angler this afternoon. I am floating toward the mouth of a side channel filled with woody debris where an enormous trout lives.

I saw him last week. I was stripping in a small fish when something uncurled into the sun-streaked water beneath him, rose like a UFO toward the surface, and then, perhaps seeing the shadow of my rod, descended back into the deep shadow and out of sight. That was all I saw. I let my hooked fish tire himself out over the deepest part of the pool but nothing else happened.

The main stem feels more powerful at night than it did during the day. The water is moving around me; I am moving against the bank, above which the stars are moving through thickets of cottonwood branches. When I backrow to slow the boat, the stars and moon slow down in the branches. You can't stop a boat in a river like this, you can just slow down and aim. The mouth of my side channel is coming up quickly and if I miss it I'm fucked.

I row hard and hear the pizza sliding back and forth in its box. The river is pushing me left and I want to be right. I make it into the seam and then into the soft water above the channel mouth and it's like turning downhill. The soft water is blacker than the chopped-up current of the main stem. I'm breathing hard. This is so dumb and if it works out it will be so cool.

There's wood as far as the eye can see. It's like something

from a fairy tale. Whole trees, with root balls like claws, form the lattice through which smaller wood has been sieved into tighter and tighter knots out of which nothing escapes: a girl's bicycle, shopping bags, mats of pine needles, deer bones. The wood soaks up the moonlight, and the water burbles through in blackness. I try to imagine the honeycomb inside, where silent water flows beneath a few inches of air. Through it all, goes my educated guess, crawl mice.

Mice are active at night, and therefore so are big trout.

I let out fifteen feet of anchor line and drag my boat up the bank. To be safe and not sorry I put a slipknot in the other end. I have brought my headlamp but I don't need it to see the water. It's like spilled ink, and down the middle runs a slender foam line as bumpy as a rash. The foam curls up against a log and where the log ends the foam turns into the wood and vanishes. Somewhere below that is where he lives.

It isn't a technically challenging cast. I just need to think like a mouse. I have fallen off a branch into the water. The splash I made when I hit the water alerted the huge predators beneath to my presence, and the vibrations of my tiny limbs tell them where I'm going. If there were no moon I might hold still and wait for the current to bring me ashore. But tonight I am a perfect silhouette. My only hope is to find the shore, or a bough to cling to.

I get in a "mousy" mood as I sit in the gravel and eat my pizza. There's nothing better than a large pepperoni pie all to yourself, and I have brought a six pack of Pineapple IPA to accompany it. I will only drink one of them right now. It is a dangerous journey. People die out here. Two years ago I found a body. I called the cops and everything. It was a homeless person who had washed down from one of the camps, and he was probably dead or half dead when he fell in, but still. I should have worn a life jacket. I have three in my boat but they're too small for me. I keep them to be in compliance

with FWP, and adult ones take up too much room.

I feel certain that I'm going to catch a monster tonight. Then again, I always feel that way. If that isn't your disposition then you probably don't end up as a fisherman. But I really don't think many other people fish this spot, which you can't get to on foot and which doesn't look like much from the main channel, and even if other people do know about it I'm certain they aren't mousing it at night. I'm the only one smart or dumb enough to try it. I already feel bad for William for missing it.

The pizza is from Pizza Mouth. Tonight I wanted something big and greasy and perfectly round, like a pizza from a cartoon. I open a second beer and in the moonlight I rig up my rod.

I brought my seven-weight with a floating line and a homemade leader that tapers down to fifteen-pound mono. I don't think he's going to be leader-shy. The most important thing is not to let him run into the wood.

It's chilly out tonight. The air and the water are both about 50 degrees. I paid extra to get my truck shuttled after hours but I brought a tent and sleeping bag just in case. I did not bring my axe because I couldn't figure out a way to wrap it up so it wouldn't pop the raft. I don't have a saw either. I have a pocket knife. Hopefully there's nothing big that needs cutting.

It's time. I'm greasy and satisfied and I walk over to the other side of the gravel bar to wash my hands. I rub my face and palms with wet sand to scour the grease. I walk quietly over the rocks. Do birds of prey hunt at night? What, if anything, is this fish scared of? Maybe a huge owl? I could drop my fly in the foam and let it dead drift down into the deepest part of the hole, or I could toss it across and twitch it back through the current. I will endeavor to produce that effect of a mouse falling in from the wood.

The problem is, when I start false-casting, I can't see my fly, and I have no idea how much line I have out or where it's going to land. I could put on the headlamp but that would create shadows and it doesn't seem in the spirit of the thing. Instead I will trust my instincts, as Luke does when switches off his targeting computer in Episode IV and uses the Force to destroy the Death Star.

I just go for it. I take a false cast, feel the weight of the line in the air, focus on the glint of what might be a shredded birthday balloon at the edge of the wood where the foam line terminates, and drop my fly with a splash. I take a short strip, and another short strip, skittering the mouse across the water. Help me, help me, help me! I can see the glint of my mouse's plastic eyes in the moonlight, and I wiggle my rod tip, dragging him across the foam line, my little tail creating a tiny wake as I flee. Twitch, twitch, twitch...

Kaboom!

The water explodes. I nearly drop the rod as I grab at my fly line and it's like setting the hook on a cinder block. The water is a boiling crater and I lock my trigger finger and lean back with my whole torso.

I get on the brakes on him as he tries to swim toward the wood and for a second we're connected by a quivering fly line, my rod bend double, droplets of water catching moonlight as they spring from the knots on my leader, and I think maybe I've got him. Then he comes to his senses. My rod tips woodpeckers and when it comes back up I'm tight to something but it isn't the fish.

"Fuck!" I shout into the night. I'm holding the cork with one hand, my rod curved softly toward the wood, the line wandering in the tug of the current.

I give my rod a halfhearted jerk and then try throwing a roll

cast at the black tangle where I'm snagged. The fly is deep underwater. I point my rod tip straight so I can feel it. There's the slight give of a still-attached branch. Not that it matters. Already I'm visualizing the rest of this float for mouseable spots and coming up emptybrained. But I'd like my eight-dollar fly back.

I let my frustration crest and subside before I try to free the hook. I'm angry at myself for losing the fish, but, on the other hand: holy shit! As a proof of concept, it couldn't have gone better. You aren't supposed to land a fish like that every time. And the mouse worked just like it was supposed to. My spot had the pot of gold. I should be happy. At the very least, I've earned another beer.

I give a few sharp tugs, then whip the tip back and forth, and I feel the branch starting to loosen. I have fifteen pounds to work with. I point straight at the snag and pull, squeezing the fly line against the cork, and with a feeling like a banana peeling off the bunch the hook comes free. I strip it in and feel the weight of the branch coming with it. I dredge it through the inky pool, the rod tip bent, my line making a vee that parts and glistens in the moonlight. I kneel in the gravel and raise my rod and reach out to grab the leader, and I drag the fly in the rest of the way by hand. It isn't a branch. Maybe a mat of leaves? It glints through the shallow water. A piece of balloon?

I follow the fly line with my fingers until I feel the elk-hair bristles of the mouse's head. I try to free the hook but it's jammed into a piece of metal. As I angle it back and forth my fingers dig into something like wet bread. The water ripples onto the gravel and I pull the heavy mess up the bank and into the moonlight and gasp and fall back onto my ass.

"What the fuck," I say. "Oh, man, what the fuck?"

It's a gold wristwatch on an arm.

I'm wiping my hand frantically in the gravel, pushing through the rocks to grab a handful of wet sand, and then stumbling backward and dropping my rod. I scramble like Gollum down the bank and plunge my hand into the water, scrubbing it with sand and gravel, but I can still feel the bread-soft flesh on my fingertips and beneath it the marble touch of bone.

"Goddamnit," I'm saying under my breath as I scrub my hand. "Goddamnit, goddamnit, goddamnit." I spit into the water, afraid that I've inhaled contaminated air. I blow a snot rocket into the dark, first one nostril and then the other. I take a few big steps back up the bank and from this vantage point I look again at what I've dragged onto the rocks.

It is a decomposing human forearm wearing a gold watch. My mouse pattern is hooked between the links of the watch and the watch has in turn dug through the flesh on the wrist and is hooped around white bone. Or, bones. There are two of them. The radius and ulna. The names come to me with great clarity. The flesh is grey and ragged; under it is a mottling of what I assume in the moonlight to be muscle and fat, and one silvered band of ligament. The fingers are missing but the thumb is still there. Everything ends at the elbow.

I sit there for a little while breathing heavily and scrubbing my hand with damp sand. I think about vomiting, but I'm not nauseous. I'm just full and grossed out and my hand won't get clean. My rod tip is poking into the water and my leader is pigtailed on the surface. In the low thunder of the main stem I can hear the groans and clicks of large rocks on the river bottom teetering and rolling in the force of the current.

It's a Rolex. A Yacht-Master, in fact. It's all gold, with a white face. The time reads 1:17 and the date, under a magnifying lens, is the 13th. Correct. The bracelet closes with a satisfying click, and when I hold up my arm the face gleams in the moonlight.

What I learn in the first week of owning a Rolex is that the rest of my wardrobe doesn't stack up. My hoodies and fishing pants and camouflage Xtra Tuff boots look schlubby, and I cycle through all my hats without finding one that feels appropriate. I realize that I haven't been dressing my age.

I root through the closet until I find a pair of dark blue corduroys. They're cuffed at the ankles from the last time I wore them, which must have been at a fishing thing or wedding, and when I uncuff them sand spills out onto the floor. I put them in the wash and run a quick cycle. I have a dark green plaid dress shirt that I've worn with the corduroys in the past, and a braided leather belt, and an Orvis shooting sweater with a quilted patch on the right shoulder for your gun, although I'm a lefty. The pants are done in twenty minutes and I put them in the dryer on high. I haven't taken off the watch in a while and the band has left an imprint on my skin. It's a little snug.

I put my pants on hot from the dryer. So this is what I was meant to look like. I admire myself in the mirror from every angle, shooting my cuffs a little bit to reveal the watch, and then, in a stroke of inspiration, I climb up on a chair and reach up into the upper shelf of the closet and pull out the black wool scally cap my uncle gave me for Christmas. Et voilà.

Desperado's doesn't deserve me like this. Neither does Town & Country or the Union or Pavlov's. I type "restaurant" into Google Maps and peruse the list. Unfortunately my spending power hasn't changed. And then, like the beam from a lighthouse: CORK!. Their late-night happy hour runs ten to close. I flick my wrist and check my watch for the time.

I used to hate CORK!, and now, for those same reasons, I respect it. Here is a bar where a reasonable person can have

a glass of wine or a Belgian beer from a bottle in a tall glass, surrounded by well-dressed, likeminded 30-somethings, and a pretty big charcuterie board for only twelve dollars, without the distraction of sports on TV. There is a mirror behind the bar which allows me to follow the tattooed female bartenders with my eyes while barely moving my head. I should have brought a book or a magazine, though I'm not sure where I would have put it. There's barely room at this bar seat for the wide charcuterie board. To my right is the muscular back of a man in a white dress shirt, his body angled away from me, talking to two women I can't see. To my left is the narrow back of a tall man in a lavender dress shirt, who is talking to a group of men and women all taking notes on their phones. There are four open bottles of wine on the bar beside him, all from the same wine place, and none of the people taking notes are drinking.

There are only so many excuses to check the time. I'm focused on my charcuterie board, exercising restraint so I don't run out of onion jam and stoneground mustard before I run out of toast points, when there comes a tap on my shoulder. I've had three glasses of Montepulciano and I swivel with gusto. The tapper is one of the women from my right, smiling broadly and holding out an iPhone in a glittery blue case. The man in the white shirt is gone.

"Excuse me," the woman says. "Would you mind taking our picture?"

"I wouldn't mind at all," I say. I accept the phone, which is already unlocked and open to the camera. The women get into formation, arms around each other's shoulders, lips pursed, and then as if on cue, though I haven't said anything, one of them sticks out her tongue and the other one looks up at the ceiling in mock surprise. I'm taking dozens of photos.

"Hold on," I say, turning the phone horizontal. The women switch poses: the one looking up now makes a kissy face and

then crosses her eyes, and the one with her tongue out raises her eyebrows and pouts her lips as if to say, "I've seen it all." As I'm snapping photos a text notification drops down from the top of the screen. It's from a contact named "John(?)", and it's a photo of his dick backdropped against a black-and-white tile floor.

I wait for the notification to recede, taking several more photos, then I hand the phone back to the woman. As I pass it to her I let my watch peek out of my shirt cuff. She notices. I smile.

The problem is that the watch is slightly too small. I wake up with purple fingers. I can't scrub under it in the shower. So I make inquiries at the mall. First I try Sloane & Sons, Jewelers. I am greeted immediately. I find that in my corduroys and button-down shirt I am noticed in places where I used to be ignored—the tapas bar on Higgins, and the car dealership, though I was only there to use the bathroom, and the Maps Room at the public library, but that I wait longer at places I used to slip into like a warm bath, including Desperado's, the Silver Slipper, Pizza Mouth, and the Pancake Parlor. I have become the "other." In any case, the woman at Sloane & Sons tells me they don't work on watches. She suggests I try another store at the mall called The Jewel Box.

At the Jewel Box I am greeted warmly by a young woman who is too charming, too casually aloof, to actually work here. She must be the daughter of the owner. She is college-aged and plump and beautiful and she comes out from behind the circular mirrored display case to inspect whatever it is I am handing her—in this case, the watch from my wrist.

"Ooh," she says, gently touching my swollen fingers. And then: "Mm," as she inspects the watch. She likes it. She

looks at me out of the corner of her eye with undisguised curiosity. She may not be a full-time jeweler but she comes from jeweler stock.

“We don’t work on these,” she says. “You could try The Clock Shop.” Handing back the watch, she holds on a moment too long. In another universe we would get married and go to alumni football games together.

I google Clock Shop and see that it’s all the way across Brooks, in the strip mall next to Pita Pit. I’d rather starve than have lunch at Pita Pit, and according to my watch it’s lunchtime. I haven’t eaten in the mall in years, so I go and check the big angled Store Directory to see what my options are. The map is numbered, and the numbers are cross-indexed in a big list, broken down by category. Here are the jewelers, and would you look at that? Besides Sloane & Sons and The Jewel Box, there’s a third listing: Joshua.

I find Joshua at the far end of the mall next door to a hollowed-out storefront under active construction. There’s a curtain of construction plastic hanging over the open façade and behind it is the ghostly silhouette of a scaffolding, which comes into sharp relief each time the plastic billows up against it. There’s a worker standing on the scaffolding using a nailgun: hiss-pop! Hiss-pop! Above the top of the plastic curtain, stained against the beige wall, is the outline of what clearly used to be an Auntie Anne’s Pretzels sign.

Joshua is a fluorescent alcove with a single jewel case dragged out onto the carpet of the mall’s corridor in what I would assume is a violation of mall policy, except I can’t see why anyone would care back here. This is a terminal point in the layout of the shopping area. There is no one in the storefront and only when I step around the jewel case and onto the starkly lit tile of the store floor do I realize that, by a trick of architecture and textured paint, there is a hidden

doorway behind the register. In my peripheral vision I see myself entering the store from several angles. I hear an electronic chime behind the hidden doorway.

A man appears. He's at least six-six, in a purple dress shirt and black slacks, with narrow shoulders, a widow's peak, and a long brown ponytail.

"How can I help you?" he says. He glances at the security mirror before looking me up and down, and his gaze lingers on my wrist. I shrug my shoulder, letting the watch slide free of my sleeve.

From the next storefront comes the Hiss-pop! Hiss-pop! of the nailgun.

"That's a sick watch," he says.

"Thanks man," I say. "Are you Joshua?"

"The same," he says. He turns his palm upward and with two fingers extends a business card like a magician. I recognize this guy but I can't place him. I wonder if he goes to the bars. His card says: Joshua Wineburg, GIA-Trained, Master Jeweler & Goldsmith.

I slide my thumbnail under the clasp of my watch, open the bracelet, and remove it from my wrist. Joshua has long fingers. He flips a switch at the base of an articulated lamp on the counter and the light comes on in a ring around a big magnifying lens. He holds the watch under the light and turns it over several times, inspecting the clasp and the stem and the joints of the bracelet. From next door the guy in the scaffolding shouts something in Spanish, and another guy laughs. Joshua gets out a giant set of tweezers from a velvet-lined drawer and for the first time looks up to meet my gaze.

"May I?" he says.

“Go for it,” I say. Joshua pokes with the pointy ends of the tweezers and the band comes free.

Hiss-pop! Hiss-pop!

Joshua closes his eyes until the nailgun stops.

“Probably don’t get used to that,” I say.

“Certainly you do *not*,” Joshua says. His nails are long and shaped and I wonder if he keeps them like that as tools. Resourceful, I think. Then I realize how ridiculous that is. He has tools. He’s not a chimpanzee. Joshua is quick putting the watch back together. He takes a wet wipe from a packet in the drawer and cleans the watch completely before handing it back to me. He switches off the lamp comes out from behind the counter.

“So, what do you want to know?” he says. “It’s real. You need a resize.”

I flush a little. My googling scatters like roaches in the fluorescence of Joshua’s knowledge.

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ve never had one before. I don’t really know what to do. Can you resize it? Should we, like, check the battery?”

I am still holding the watch out toward Joshua, but he will no longer take it. Some kind of etiquette governs this situation, and the trial period has ended. He takes a dime out of his slacks pocket and holds it delicately between his thumb and forefinger.

“I can’t resize this watch,” he says. “I mean, I could. But, you need a certified Rolex technician. It’s the right way to do things. And no, you don’t need a new battery. This is an automatic watch. It works on perpetual motion.” He holds up his own wrist to demonstrate. He is wearing an enormous silver watch with a black face and he moves his hand back and

forth like a pendulum. "The motion of your hand keeps the spring wound," he says.

"What if you take it off?" I said. "Or don't wear it for a while?"

Hiss-pop-pop-pop!

Joseph closes his eyes pinches the bridge of his nose. He doesn't answer me for a while and it seems like he's fighting an inner pain. Perhaps a stray nail has entered his skull and affected his personality. After a few seconds he lowers himself into a chair and takes a pen out of his pocket. He writes something on the back of the card he handed me earlier and which I've left on the glass.

"Try this address tonight," Joshua says. "After six PM. He works out of his house by appointment. This is the guy, okay? The guru. He'll expect you."

I take the card. Beneath the address, in a seventh-grade boy's knobby cursive, Joshua has written: "Strictly Confidential."

"Is he a certified Rolex technician?" I ask.

Joshua quits rubbing his temples and glares at me.

"If you take it off it runs until the spring is fully depowered, and then it stops. This watch has a 55-hour movement. To start it from a flat reserve, you hand-wind it. Among collectors who rotate watches..." He raises his eyebrows at me. "Some choose to store them in a watch-winding cabinet. Or," he says, and smiles to himself. "You could attach it to your dog's collar."

"Six PM," I say, holding up the card.

Next door a board whines through a saw blade and sawdust sprays like confetti against the inside of the plastic

curtain.

At six I pull up to a low-slung house at the top of the Rattlesnake. All the way up here I was treated to tasteful secluded mansions but this place is small and old. Back when this was all woods, this house was out in the middle of it. There's a purple Mitsubishi Eclipse in the driveway. I look down at Joshua's card and double check the address. The two little fingers on my right hand are asleep and I unclip the watchband for a few seconds, working my hand muscles, before clipping it shut and getting out of the truck. I re-tuck my plaid shirt, which is starting to wear a little loose, and kneel to brush out my cuffs.

Joshua answers the door in a hoodie, his hair spilling out around his neck. It comes to me in a flash: he used to play pool at the bar. He had his own stick in a little leather case.

"Come in," he says, and he shows me through a door into the attached garage, which has been converted into a workshop. Along the back wall is a wide tool bench with a pegboard above it, and to my right are two enormous wooden card-catalog cabinets like we had at my elementary school library, with index card labels: Audemars Piguet, Bulova, Cartier. There's a piano in the corner with a bunch of framed photos. Next to the window is a worktable with a big architect's lamp over it and, mounted above, a huge flat-screen TV. The TV shows a crisp zoomed-in image of the tabletop.

"It was my parent's house," Joshua says. "May I?"

I hold out my wrist with his long cool fingers he unclips the watch. The relief is intense. He sits down at the table and the watch slides into view on the huge overhead screen, magnified enormously. He turns on the lamp and the whole room brightens.

Joshua is more at ease here. He positions the watch at the center of a white mat emblazoned with rulers and concentric circles. I'm watching on the TV, where the face of the watch is the size of my head. Joshua turns the band vertical and peers down at it and then gets up and retrieves several tools from the pegboard. He goes over to the card catalogue and opens one of the drawers labeled "Rolex." He takes something out, measures it with a set of calipers, and returns to the desk. He places a pin and a loose bracelet link to the table and they're mirrored overhead. They are the same gold as my watch.

I watch on the screen as Joshua uses a tiny screwdriver to remove one of the pins in the band of my watch. He adds the loose link and puts everything back together. He holds it up to me, open, and I present my wrist. He buckles it down.

"Much better," he says. He unclips it and returns it to the table. He plucks a towelette from a dispenser and wipes down the band, the back face, the bezel, the glass, and the little magnifying window over the date.

He switches off the lamp and swivels toward me in his chair. He is not smiling.

"Where'd you get it?" he says.

I swallow. I was ready for this.

"I came by it honestly," I say.

Joshua nods. "Shall I assume you're distantly related to the gentleman who previously owned this watch?"

"Distantly," I say. "Yes."

"Okay," Joshua says finally. He hands me my watch, clipped shut. I unclip it and put it on. It fits perfectly.

"How much do I owe you?" I say.

It's Joshua's turn to sigh deeply. He tents his fingers in front of his face.

"According to the code of the guild, I can't charge you," he says.

I nod gravely. I understand that he has taken a risk.

"But," Joshua says, holding up his index finger. "I will grant you one wish."

I take a deep breath.

He stares at me, waiting. With the subtlest of glances, I check my watch. It's six-fifteen. The sun has gone behind the ancient Larch and Ponderosa that surround Joshua's parents' house, layering the room in golden shadow.

I am ready for this, too.

"I wish to know myself from the inside out," I say.

Joshua raises his eyebrows. He blinks.

"Well, alright," he says. "People don't usually fall for that. It's sixty-five dollars."

I pat the pockets of my corduroys. But I'm past this moment; what's happening in the room, as I get out my wallet and count the money, is happening in another dimension, to which I am only mechanically connected. My head, and my thoughts, are hovering in the golden light.

I am shaking hands with Joshua.

"Hey," he is saying. "Hey. Destroy my address, okay? Hello?"

I will know myself from the inside out. I don't know where that came from, but I like it. Who's the guru now? I leave the garage and walk to my truck. I have my fishing stuff in

the back. I feel like I've been given a gift, a clearance, from Joshua and from the universe. The significance of the gift is not lost on me: a gold watch, for thirty years of loyal service, on the occasion of my retirement. I am thirty years old. I don't know what I'm retiring from, exactly, but I think it's safe to say: my old life, my old ways. In this metaphor, the dead guy is my boss. I will honor him and learn from him. I will balance courage with caution. I will spend more time outdoors.

I give two loud honks as I pull away from Joshua's house, and the trees around me explode with birds.