

PROLOGUE

The Reality of Sisyphus

ork the rounded edge of the shovel just inside the rut of the stream, where the grass is growing. It makes a nice slice sound of shovel tip penetrating turf, then dirt, then a thick layer of sandy soil. It hasn't rained for a month. A drought. Two of the four springs running along this quarter mile of stream are dried up. You know it will rain again; it will rain soon. The odds are, it has to rain soon, and when it does you want the water to flow down through your recently hand-dug channel—to open up, deepen and widen the channel, and not to spread out into an infinity of rivulets and underground tunnels and roundabouts that never return to the main stream, turning the bottom of this paddock into a marsh.

You try to balance it out so that sixty percent of the time you have the right hand down close to the lug of the spade and the left hand at the end of the shaft because your natural inclination is to do it the other way around which puts too much strain on your right hand, right arm, right side. The tip of the spade slices through turf, dirt, grit. Water flows into the quarter-moon shaped cut in the earth. Yes, this is a stream, not a dried out ditch. It will flow again.

This stretch of the stream is one hundred yards long and at a shovel width at a time—and often several thrusts to be made in that half-foot width—you have a ways to go but you don't think of that. You might've cheated once or twice, stood up straight, leaned on the shovel, stretched out your back, and eyeballed the entire length of the stream to come, turned and looked down at the length of the stream completed, but you know this is not a good way to get the job done. Just as you don't write five pages—skipping lines on a yellow legal pad—and then stop, count the number completed, and the number, twelve, to go to fulfill the morning's quota.

You pull the shaft to your left hip, and using the heel of the shovel as a lever against the edge of turf, push the handle down. The turf and muck strains to maintain all that it has gained in the year since you last dug it out. It holds together, grass roots fighting not to lose their grip, muck stuck to itself, water appearing from nowhere filling the gradually growing opening, the mud sucking, sucking to itself, hissing, trying to hold, then separating with a *th-swash*, and now, the part that can get to your back. You push in hard, and pull up, straightening your legs, straightening your back, pull the shovel filled with a thick pie of sod and muck, water escaping off the edges of the shovel, and either swing it back and around your right hip, dumping it by your side—the easier move—or, straining your back, triceps and stomach muscles, pull it straight up and thrust the shovel out, away from you, dumping the sod and muck on the other side of the stream.

Slice, slosh, sucking-th-wash, strain, fulfillment.

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Fulfillment: I've shown the completed and freshly dug-out stream—clean and clear water for

the horses to drink now flowing freely—to my wife as we and the dogs have crossed it on the way out for a walk, to my son as we've ridden alongside it on horses, to my daughter as she's driven her truck over the stream and to the spring and the marshy area in which, while mowing, I've gotten the tractor stuck, and out of which she will pull me. On the evening after completing the digging, I've soliloquized at dinner to wife and sons and daughter about the engineering feat I had pulled off that late afternoon, but no matter. No one understands. With one exception—my mother always did. How she would rant in the winter when the stream became blocked, the water rose along its banks, funneled into a maze of sluiceways, then froze, forming an archipelago of iced-over, dangerous rinks hidden by tufts of tall grass, or in the spring when the grass grew too tall on the stream's sides, thick weeds and multiflora rose crept in, the current came to a stop, the rains fell and the field became a marsh which the horses would tear through, their hooves scooping out divots, trampling the grass that was left, turning half an acre into a mud hole. And how she would rhapsodize when its banks were mowed and its channel was open and she could watch her three Thoroughbreds standing side-by-side lower their heads, test the current with their muzzles, and sip the fresh spring water.

I've been digging this stream out since I was a teenager and used to attack it in the heat of the day, engine revved high, working fast and hard, damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead, do or die. I have been digging out this stream in the early spring, struck an odd rock—a rock that sounded different, not the usual clang of steel against stone, but a softer sound, a sound with a hollowness to it, and then witnessed the primordial magic of a feed-tub sized snapping turtle come out of his winter hibernation and slowly shake off his slumber, stick out his powerful legs, lift up his carapace-shielded body, and move smoothly, more gracefully than you'd imagine, stealthily, confidently, powerfully away from me, across the stream, and into the tall grass.

Just last week, I was digging near one of the springs of my youth where as teenagers on summer Sundays Tom Voss and I, after galloping horses in the morning for my father, used to pick mint, bring bags of it back to the house, make buckets of mint juleps, and invite our friends over. Fully into my rhythm of thrust into the mud, stomp foot down on lug of spade, shove deeper with foot, hands, arms, back, lean shaft back, toss muck—suddenly something was wildly, impossibly fast, wriggling out from under my foot causing me to leap into the air higher than Nureyev on his best night, and yell like hell as it elongated, unreeling itself beneath me, slither-swimming away, its body moving in perfect forward S-motion out from under my airborne shadow, its head raised up like that of a python's in the old Tarzan movies. My feet came down, I hesitated for a split-second, thought of thrusting my spear at the point right below his head, then instead high-stepped backwards while watching it whip upstream.

Such an interlude is extremely beneficial to stream digging. It is worth at least twenty yards. It is a gift: the heart races, the pathways of the mind are flushed out and the electric currents of fear flash through. Everything—every blade of grass, tip of a rock, head of a frog—is pulsatingly clear, in highest definition. The body feels limber and strong and fresh again like an eighteen-year-old's. It's that hint of dark primordial danger, and even the possibility of death, that does it: the imagining of two hollow fangs penetrating the rubber of the boots, sinking into your flesh, joining yourself, your humanity, to the reality of one million years of evolution, the pain sharp, like the prongs of a pitch fork entering your foot which you'd experienced as a child, the shock of pain so sudden, so unexpected, and then, wrenching your foot away, the snake-head releasing from your boot. Then the worry: was it poisonous, did it inject its venom, would you have to go to the emergency ward, was there anyone home to go with you, should you pull the boot off, cut the wound with a knife and try to suck the venom out?

And now, for the next half hour of your life, every thrust of the shovel has meaning. You are totally into the digging, beads of sweat roll pleasantly down your sides, dollops of sweat drip off

your nose, you can feel the blisters forming on the old callouses under the knuckles, and as much as you've tried to lift with your legs, to be smart, to lean back and swing the shovel with your full body, nevertheless, you can feel the fatigue in your back, but you don't mind it. You can judge from it how hard you've been working and tomorrow, it may be sore, but it will remind you of all that you have accomplished today. Your body is giving out in one way but in another, it has found a rhythm, a comfortable rhythm, like a long, everlasting Grateful Dead riff that is exhausting the band, the deadheads, everyone, but no one wants it to end and it just keeps going and going. The mud splashes up onto the lenses of your protective glasses creating little spots in your vision. Less and less you rely on your arms. Instead—say your shovel clanks against an awkwardly-shaped, cumbersomely heavy rock right there in what you want to be the channel of the stream. It is too late in the day for you to simply put the tip of the shovel beneath the rock, work the spade further and further under the rock, then with arm and stomach muscles, use your body as a crane, lift the rock up and out, and dump it to the side. No—you have to put the shovel down, set it beside the stream. Plant one foot, then the other, into the mud you want to get rid of, bend down, dig with fingers through the grit, wedge one knee against the bank of the stream, claw deeper under the rock searching the ridges for a good grip, lift, strain with entire body, the rock not wanting to leave, the suction holding it in place, and then with a *thwwaaash-clup* it is released. You stand, pressing the cold, wet unchangeable hardness of the druid stone to your thighs and crotch. Covered with mud, straining every muscle in your body, hunched over, feet spread wide, you crab-walk up the bank and over to the landfill area, and fling it onto the other rocks and cinder blocks and chunks of concrete.

The leaden stone doesn't bounce or roll or ricochet off the other rocks. Seeming incredibly lifeless after your wrestling match, it cracks against a cinder block, splits it in half, rolls off the pile onto the grass and is immediately stationery. It lies awkwardly on its side, in the grass, alone and out of place. Feeling badly for this stone wrenched from its century-old demesne of individual respectability and carelessly thrown on this pile of rubble, you take a few steps, pick it up and place it firmly in a gap formed by two respectable rocks.

Walk back to the stream. Cross the area just dug out. Step up the bank. Sit down. Look downstream at the satisfying wave-like rhythm of the black bank, scalloped on one side, a series of rounded shovel thrusts, all the way to the horse crossing. Glance upstream—how many pages to go?—towards the top spring. Fifteen yards. It's 6:30 p.m. In the shade of the spring's trees. You'll reach the spring by 7:00 and then you'll walk out of the shade into the sunlight—no longer an adversary, no longer relentlessly pressing down on you, but now friendly, caressing your mud-splattered arms, massaging your back, drying the sweat of your t-shirt—stroll down along the stream, admiring your work, stopping here and there to remove any blockage of the flow, to the plastic liter tonic bottle that you know still holds two or three good pulls of water. Sit on the bank in the angled sunlight and admire the force of the current while draining the bottle from its wide mouth. Then rise up, grab the shovel, and head in, looking forward to the modern delight of a hot shower—fresh, clean water massaging the back, fresh, clean hot water slapping down hard on the lower back, loosening the muscles, the jets fingering into mud-splattered ears and eye sockets and hair, rinsing away the rank, atavistic, spermy, tad-pole scent you have loved since you were nine or ten and used to spend full days covered in it, your mother and father pleading with you to stop building the dams that backed up the stream.

As a youth, I would work in the lower section where the banks are higher, the slope of the stream is steeper, and the water ran faster. I'd pick a spot that had strong, secure banks. Set rocks—river boulders in my mind—across in a line from bank to bank, the water rippling over their tops and purling through the interstices. Then, smaller rocks in the gaps, the flow slowing. With my short-handled, rust-red Army shovel that my father had given me for Christmas—I loved it; it could become an axe, a hammer, a shovel and even a saw—I'd dig mud out, making a "lake"

on the uphill side, and plaster the mud against the upstream wall of the dam. Using the shovel's sharp blade, I'd carve rectangular sections of turf out of the side of the banks and strategically place them against the deep water side, as well as across the top, watching the water level rise, filling the newly cut banks, rise above the grass line, putting more and more pressure on the dam, popping through gaps here and there. I remember rushing off, having to hunt for "boulders" further afield, reaching my fingers deep into the dark water, into the mud and grit, beneath the rock, and, body weary, tiring, but eight-year-old mind not realizing it, I pulled against a cumbersome rock. Squatted over it and heaved against its weight and suction. Dug my heels in, making good gripping spots, and leaned as in a tug-of-war contest. The suction released. I collapsed on the bank, the "boulder," too big for me to handle, in my lap. I found a protrusion beside a slight concavity, a perfect grip. Holding the rock's unforgiving weight and its sharp edges tight against my stomach, I hobbled upstream as it slipped downwards, pressing against my crotch and thighs. Reaching the dam, I halted, gathering all strength and resolve, and stepped, Gulliver-like, over this Lilliputian project. The boulder was inexorably sliding out of my grip—the lives of thousands of dam workers below at stake. I wanted to slowly lower it into just the right spot where it was needed to blunt the growing force of the rushing water but all I could do was step over the dam, the workers looking up in terror, and let it go. It made a Herculean splash, a splash out of *Moby Dick*, coating me with muck. I pulled my red bandana out of my rear pocket, wiped off my face, collapsed on the bank and watched as the dam held back the water, the water level rose, filling the canyons, the stream backed up, the reservoir swelled, and a shimmering, crystalline wave finally flowed in a perfectly formed, smoothly-curved, and constantly-swirling arc over the top of the dam, creating a weir.

That was sixty years ago. And I know that last night I pulled the same rock—the water rushing off it revealing the beauty of its flinty, scarlet-streaked and silver-chinked surface, unseen for five decades, anchored deep below the surface by a handle-like protrusion—out of the stream that sixty years ago I had deposited as the linchpin for my project, to halt the incessant, burrowing, forward-roiling rush of water, of time, to let it rise and form a pond, a lake, a reservoir of the present.