



## CHAPTER 1

I have been coming to the coastal wetlands of Flagler County for longer than I can remember. My friends used to say I was the biggest fool this side of St. Augustine back when I was a young. But I thought I was the lucky one. Before the sun was too high in the sky, I'd wrap a baloney sandwich in waxed paper, grab an orange from a tree outside our door and head east as fast as my feet would carry me. My destination was the <sup>1</sup>East Coast Canal, now part of Florida's Intracoastal Waterway.

I was just nine or ten years old when I first discovered the animal trail that led to the canal. It allowed me to pass through the marshlands unscathed and arrive at the waterway in no time. Long before these bones got old and tired, I could run faster than most boys my age. I could make it to my favorite spot along the canal in less than thirty minutes if I just walked at a brisk pace. Most times, though, I ran because I could hear the waterway calling me.

There were no houses or condominiums lining that liquid highway in those days. It was just farmland and swamp. The canal was a busy

---

<sup>1</sup> The Florida Intracoastal Waterway had its beginning toward the end of the nineteenth century, a natural outgrowth of an effort to develop the almost-connected chain of creeks, rivers, lakes and sounds along Florida's east coast into one continuous waterway. The earliest surveys were made in 1844, but nearly forty years passed before construction began. From then until becoming U.S. government property in 1929, the history of the waterway was a continuous fight against vegetation, financing and legislation. (SOURCE: Florida Inland Navigation District)

place, though. It was used mainly for shipping goods from Jacksonville to Daytona and farther south. Why a body had no idea what he might see passing up and down the waterway in those days. Now, the traffic is dominated by big cabin cruisers and jet-skis.

I went there because it was quiet and cool. Eighty- and ninety-degree days are common in Florida and especially at my family's home. Inland, the heat was oppressive; it felt like it hit triple digits every day. But on the banks of the East Coast Canal, the temperature felt ten to fifteen degrees cooler because a relentless breeze made you smile the minute you emerged from the wild underbrush that lined both sides of the azure thoroughfare.

Sometimes when the fish were running, I'd catch me a drum or a crappie and be happier than my baby brother on Christmas morning. You see, drum don't want to be caught, and they put up a bit of a fight. Crappie too, but they never were too big. When a two- or three-pound drum hit, I imagined I was fighting Moby Dick.

Have you read or even know of "Moby Dick?" It was mandatory reading when I was a lad. It's a literary classic, written by <sup>2</sup> Herman Melville in the nineteenth century. He was a long winded old cuss who penned a thrilling tale about the voyages of the *Pequod*, a whaling ship steered by an angry old salt, named Captain Ahab. He was on a relentlessly pursuit of a great Sperm Whale he called Moby Dick. Experts back then liked to debate which of the characters was most evil, the elusive whale or Ol' Captain Ahab. I voted for Ahab, because I've never seen a fish yet that liked to be poked and prodded by man.

Along my favorite fishing spot at the East Coast Canal was a big, old Live Oak Tree, the kind that added to the Florida mystique in the days following WWII. Americans were first discovering the wonders of the Sunshine State and flocking here like cotton-pickers to lemonade. There I go putting my age on display again. You youngsters don't know a thing about cotton or lemonade. Most of you have never seen cotton in the field or tasted fresh-squeezed lemonade. When I was a boy and the sun was scorching hot, there was nothing better than lemonade freshly picked from the trees on our land. My daddy was a tradesman but we always had a garden and lots of fruit trees on the Flagler property we owned.

I'm getting sidetracked here. So, back to my canal.

---

<sup>2</sup> Herman Melville (Aug. 1, 1819-Sept. 28, 1891) was an American novelist, short-story writer, and poet, best known for his novels of the sea, including his 1851 masterpiece, "Moby Dick." (SOURCE: Encyclopedia Britannica)

Sometime after I turned twelve or thirteen, that big, old Live Oak and me became friends. It stretched and towered over the area I liked to visit. She provided more than shade after my long runs; she welcomed me to my destination. When it was cold and blustery in the winter, she offered up her trunk for shelter. And when I was in a bad mood, why that spacious oak listened to my troubles and never turned a deaf ear. Why I imagine that tree knows more about me than my own mama.

You might be laughing and thinking this old coot has lost his mind. Believe me. I'm as clear-headed as a preacher on Sunday morning. And I've never had a friend more loyal or trustworthy than that majestic Live Oak. Why when it commenced the thunder and rain at the drop of a hat, I'd run under that oak for protection and it never failed me. And if I had a hankering to look all the way down the canal to Daytona Beach, she'd let me climb all the way up into her crown and present me with a view that was downright breathtaking. I'd climb up there again right now if I wasn't so darn old. And just don't ask, because it's none of your business exactly how old I am. Frankly, my age sometimes distresses me.

I remember clearly the day me and that tree became intimate friends. It was a warm day, one of those that made the shirt stick to your back the minute you stepped outside. My father, who served in the U.S. Navy during the big war, called those kind of days "equatorial." It is a word he fashioned to commemorate when that big ship of his crossed the equator and the heat was so intense it just about melted the paint right off the its deck.

You see, almost all our fathers fought in World War II. They were proud of the job they did against Hitler and those brutal and demented warriors of the Rising Sun. My daddy signed up the day after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and served most of his time chasing the enemy across the Pacific Ocean. He never talked much about his service. When he saw me in those khaki military slacks, the smile on his face looked as if it was big enough to stretch all the way to Iwo Jima, where his ship took one heck of a beating. So, I wore them constantly -- clean, dirty, tattered or torn.

I loved it when he used to tell me about the times he and his buddies scrambled eggs right on the wing of one of those bombers while they waited in line to take off and torment the Japanese. My father worked below deck, but he witnessed hundreds of take-offs, landings and crashes on the deck of that old carrier.

My father served his entire enlistment aboard the U.S.S. Saratoga, one of only three aircraft carriers in the U.S. fleet prior to the bombing

of Pearl Harbor in 1941. It was en route to Hawaii at the time of the attack and fortunately was not caught in that fiery onslaught that killed so many of our innocent young men. It left a lasting impression on my father and an imprint on his sons. To this day, those veterans remain this country's greatest heroes in my estimation. I know that is a debatable statement, depending upon whether you had a loved one serve in the military or not.

I did my stint in the U.S. Air Force but didn't see any real action. I was a paper-pusher, much as I was for most of my civilian career. I liked to tell stories, and it's time I get back on track with this one. Now, where was I?

Believe it or not, I came to the canal that day packing a paperback copy of "Moby Dick" I had to read for English class, and I wasn't liking it much. That book was too large to fit into my hip pocket. So, I had to slip it into the side pocket on the military pants that all the guys wore back then because they were cool. I know this because when my father saw me wearing them all he did was smile.

I also liked them because those side pockets were large enough to carry a day's worth of sandwiches, an orange, some bubble gum and a handkerchief my mother insisted I carry without fail. The other side was suitable for Melville's "Moby Dick", my pocket knife and granddad's compass.

At any rate, I didn't have much luck fishing that day. So, I climbed up into the branches of the Live Oak and turned to page 230 of Melville's manuscript. The thing that was most impressive about my Live Oak was its size. I figured it must have been five hundred years old, because I could sit comfortably on one of its massive branches, lean my back against its trunk and be more comfortable than if I was sitting on the front porch in my daddy's rocking chair. Shucks, as far as I was concerned, the view was a whole lot better, too.

Well, I commenced to reading as Ahab continued his maniacal pursuit of Moby Dick. The thing about Melville, you see, it takes him ten pages to say what I could explain in one sentence. It wasn't the fastest-moving commentary; in fact, it was darn boring. But I pressed on. I had to if I wanted to get a passing grade in English.

Before you know it, Herman put me right to sleep. I didn't wake up until a cranky old owl screeched to tell me I was a bit out of place in the Flagler forest after dark. It scared the bejesus out of me because all I saw when my eyes opened was that owl's two big orbs staring at me like

I was <sup>3</sup> Miss Havisham's wedding cake. My backside and feet were still planted on the hefty branch I had stretched out on, half the moon was shining and there must have been a million stars looking down at me. Everything on the forest floor was as dark as Satan's heart and scary.

I knew the forest wasn't anywhere for me to be after dark. "Damnation!" I proclaimed. "I'm in big trouble now! Pa's going to whoop me good!"

When that owl heard my voice, it cocked its head and screeched a second time. It sent chill bumps up both arms and down my spine. So, I reached into my cargo pocket for my pocket knife. I unfolded it and stabbed it into the limb where I was perched. I wanted it close just in case that owl decided to attack. The minute my blade penetrated the tree's bark, I swear that mighty oak groaned at me.

I looked down below and couldn't see anything or anyone who could have made such a sound. I had heard alligators growl and wolves snarl, but I had never heard anything as pitiful as the sound I heard when I stuck my blade into the limb that was going to provide me safe harbor for the night.

I was so scared, my chill bumps started giving me a case of the trembles. So, I asked, "Is somebody out there? Show yourself!"

Lo and behold, the branch on which I sat began to sway. Then, a soft and willowy voice replied. "How would you like it if I stuck one of my sharp branches in one of your appendages?"

"What?" I said, astonished.

"After all the time we've spent together, why would you stick a knife into one of my most trustworthy branches? Hasn't it supported your weight dozens of times and kept you very comfortable this entire afternoon?"

"Okay! This isn't funny anymore. Who are you and why are you trying to play a trick on me?" I asked. "I'm just a kid!"

"Take the knife out, and I'll tell you anything you want to know," the voice said.

"Right!"

---

<sup>3</sup> In Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," Miss Havisham was a wealthy old woman who wore a rotting wedding gown, having been left at the altar many years earlier. The orphan, Pip, discovers Miss Havisham has never thrown her wedding cake away. It rots and stinks in a corner of the house, a reminder of her unhappy fate. Published in 1861, it is acclaimed as one of Dickens' finest works. (SOURCE: Encyclopedia Britannica)

Nonetheless, I leaned forward and removed the knife from the limb but kept it gripped tightly in my hand. Simultaneously the voice signed passionately and said, "Thank you."

I was so dumbstruck my mouth dropped open and I swear an army of mosquitoes must have marched down my throat because I started to cough and heave like a coal-miner on his death bed. When my convulsions subsided, tears were running down my cheeks and the owl still was staring at me. I got the feeling he was hoping I would keel over dead so he could have a midnight snack.

I pointed the blade at it and bravely said, "If you want a piece of me, it ain't going to come easy Mr. Owl. This knife is going to take a piece out of you if you get any closer. Now go find something a little smaller to chew on."

"He means you no harm, Willie," the voice said. "He's just not used to sharing his nighttime watch with a human. He stops by every night. It's you that is out of place here, boy," the voice said.

Without taking my eyes off the owl, I answered the voice. "Well, tree, if you really are talking to me, I'd appreciate it you send that owl packing. He's making me nervous. It's bad enough I fell asleep up here and won't be able to make it home in the dark. I don't need Mr. Owl staring at me all night."

"You're not alone, Willie," the voice said. "I'm here, just as I have been for hundreds of years. I won't let anything happen to you."

Before I could blink, a branch dropped down from above and pushed the owl from its perch. It flew away into the darkness, screeching again as if it had been maimed rather than displaced.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Without thinking, I said, "Thank you!" Then, I folded the pocket knife and placed it back in the cargo pocket of my pants before realizing how stupid I must have sounded. I had just thanked a tree.

"You are quite welcome, Willie," the voice replied. "Maybe if you had told me the owl scared you, I could have shooed it away without you stabbing me."

"Sorry!" I said. Of course, I didn't know what else to say. I'd never talked to a tree before.

"Just ask from now on. It's not like we're strangers. How long have you been coming here and enjoying the wonders of my limbs?"

I rubbed my eyes with my fists and shook my head to clear out whatever cobwebs remained from my sound slumber. I pinched myself. Sure enough; I was awake, and this wasn't a dream. I didn't answer right

away, though. Answering would mean I was having a conversation with a tree, and I wasn't ready to admit that just yet.

"Willie, you have nothing to fear. You've been talking freely to me for a very long time. Isn't that one of the reasons why you come here? You like to unburden your soul of your youthful problems.

"Do you remember when that bully blackened your eye a few years back? I listened to your sorrows. And I sympathized with your laments when that baseball player broke the Babe Ruth's home run record. I didn't say anything because you just needed to vent.

"Frankly, I've listened quietly for centuries. Now, when I've decided to have a conversation with you, you suddenly are silent. Why?"

Now, this was startling. Nobody could possibly have known the things I had said on my trips to the East Coast Canal. At least, I figured I was alone and nobody was listening. Holy cow! The tree not only knew my name, it new stuff. Personal stuff.

I didn't know whether to run or stay and engage the tree in a conversation. Her voice was so soft and comforting, it reminded me of how my mother sounded when she came to wake me up each morning for school. I decided to stay because I needed an explanation.

"Okay, first tell me how this can be happening? Trees don't talk," I said in my most demanding voice.

"There are many things about Nature you do not know, young Willie Brown," the voice replied. "Because of my prominence in the forest and my long standing on this land, I am granted privileges other species are not. I don't overuse them but on occasion I get lonely, too. I just thought we were friends and, being you were most likely staying the night, we'd exchange a few friendly thoughts."

"Friends?"

"We are friends by nature of your repeated visits. My branches have supported you time and time again. Even this night, when you were most afraid, I protected you. Isn't that what friends do?"

"Oh, yeah. But you're a tree and I'm a boy."

"Well, I was young once, albeit many moons ago. I know what fear is like. You know, they almost chopped me down once when they were building this canal. That was pretty scary."

"Oh, wow! I'm sure glad they didn't. This place wouldn't be the same without you. I love it here," I replied. "And you're one of the reasons I keep coming back. You are big and beautiful, and you never disappoint me. I just can't believe we're having a conversation. Can you please explain that to me?"

“First you must understand, all things in nature are conversant. Every species has its own way of conversing, I know you have heard the wolves howl and even the owl screech; it’s all a form of communication. At night, the crickets and frogs go on forever. You just can’t understand any of what they are saying.

“Do you understand them?”

“Of course, I understand all of them. I’m the oldest living thing in this forest. I’ve been listening to them for centuries.”

“Do you communicate with them, too?” I asked.

“Sometimes, but not often. I am a great listener, though and, as you might imagine, I have heard many tales and know many things,” the tree replied.

“How are you able to communicate with me,” I asked.

“As you can see, I have no mouth. But my spirit is strong, and it communes with your spirit, which I can sense the minute you make contact with any part of me. You are the first human I have shared thoughts with in more than two hundred and fifty years.”

“Really? Do you have a name? What should I call you? Tree just sounds too unfriendly.”

“My name is Sani. It was given to me by a human many years ago. He was native to this land and considered me holy. He prayed at my base regularly. His name was *Chiqua*, and he was the spiritual leader of the Timucuan tribe that settled in this area long before white people arrived on these shores”

“I’ve never heard of that tribe. Can you tell me more about them?” I asked.

“I will be glad to tell you all I know of the Timucuan, if you will tell me if your Captain Ahab slays this mighty whale he is chasing.”

“Ah, you’ve been listening while I’ve been reading. What do you think so far?”

“I’m rooting for the whale, Willie. He is one of Nature’s children and will have to outsmart this wily man of the sea. Perhaps Moby Dick can call on King Neptune to come to his aid.”

“Different story and different part of the world, Sani. I don’t think Neptune is going to come to the rescue of Moby Dick. But I’ll come back and read you more, if you would like. It’s kind of nice knowing someone is listening.”

“And I will tell you of the Timucuan Indians who were the first humans to inhabit this land.”

I spent the next few hours quizzing Sani about some of the things I had confessed to her over the many months I had been visiting the canal,

and she responded with all the correct answers. She even asked me about Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne, characters in the comic books I sometimes brought along to read while waiting for the fish to bite. And that was how we began to swap stories. I realized Sani knew many things, but her knowledge came from tiny spectrums of life that happened to wander near or under her branches.

She had never heard of heroes the likes of Batman and Superman, and found their stories intriguing because they spent all of their time “helping other humans.”

While there were many things she had learned from the past, she knew very little about humans and the modern world we shared. As much as I loved hearing about the great things she had seen and heard while growing old along the Flagler County waterway, she was enchanted by the tales of men like Captain Ahab, King Arthur and even Clark Kent. Before we both fell asleep in the wee hours, our friendship was sealed by the knowledge we could share with each other.

Sani woke me at dawn and sent me on my way, but not without urging me to return and read more of “Moby Dick”. I agreed but knew I would be away for a while. I was going to be grounded for the worry I had caused my parents.

Both of them were angry when I returned home. Momma made me promise not to do such a thing again and daddy took me to the shed and gave me a sample of what would happen if I did. It was humbling, and I was grounded a week. But neither rain, sleet nor my daddy’s belt could keep me from returning to the East Coast Canal whenever time allowed. Sani and me became more than just friends; we were buddies. You won’t believe some of the tales that mighty oak shared with me. If you are interested, read on. I promise not to deviate from the truth, according to Sani.