

Excerpt from “Beginnings”

A novel by: Roderick E. Billette

April

A soothing east wind has blown non-stop across Lake Ola all morning bringing with it the promise of new life on her crisp breeze; not unusual for an April morning in Tangerine, Florida. She never fails to show after the winds of winter blow in from the Northwest each January and bring a wet chill that penetrates to the marrow and lasts two, sometimes three months and before the soft sweet summer winds of May and June show up balmy with promises of brides and bridegrooms and outdoor gardens and old people nodding their approval at traditions carried on and before the stifling, suffocating heat of July and August prods people to hide in the shade and the lake turns into a perfection of glazed glass that reflects and refracts the summer electrical storms as they roll in on the sea breeze every afternoon, raging, violent, out-of-control and disturb the porch-sitting conversations that also rage on about politics and God and who is sleeping in who’s bed and who ought not to be and who is going to hell in a hand basket.

On this day the east wind slaps gently at the side of an old rowboat. The boat, like the two old men who sit in her, is of an indeterminate age, but you can tell at a glance from the weathered features of her cracked paint and by listening to her wood creak and moan, she is old. The two men, one black, one white, are weathered with age and experience too—the three of them, the men and the boat, are comfortable together.

They have spent many hours sitting on the water and are at ease in mood and movement together. There is a sure balance of time and maturity and nature and acceptance of their position in the orbit of one another. A comfort born of trials and testing and re-testing and testing yet again has built an unshakeable bond and trust: a trust that allows the men to sit and speak their minds freely and plainly—a trust rare in the world of men.

The two men speak in low, intense tones so the words will not carry across the water to unwanted ears; the boat rocks gently back and forth and listens; she has absorbed many secrets over time—secrets she will never reveal, but now that she is old secrets strain her to the limit—her ribs groan in the lapping waves.

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Portraits of male ancestors surround him—stare down at him from the pecky cypress walls—study him—judge him—yes, judge, that is the correct word. In particular his paternal Grandpa Kelzo’s diamond-blue-eyes arrest his intentions--his last words to him resonate:

“One day, Lander boy, like everyone who’s come before me and is who’s yet to come, I’ll be just another picture hangin’ on a wall somewheres and one day, when you least expect the question, yore own grandchildren will stop playin’ with their toys long enough to look up and curiously ask, ‘Who was that man?’ and you’ll say that was *my* grandfather, *your* great grandfather, would you like to hear all about him? And they’ll say to you, ‘Not right now Papa and you won’t understand why they aren’t ready to know and they won’t understand why they should know and they’ll go right back to a child’s play-pretties of fancy and forget.

“They won’t know or care how I fought or bled or loved or lived or nearly died of a broken heart once—they won’t know and they won’t care until one day they have the chance to live too.”