

Hells Canyon

The bearded man walked slowly through the door, took off his yellow baseball cap, and shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans. He looked around the room, smiled, and walked to the dartboard. He pulled out the three darts, stepped behind the blue line, turned, and threw the darts with short jerks of his arm. Two landed in the bull's eye.

Joe clapped his hands and said, "Good darts, stranger. You've played that game before. Now come over here for a drink or two."

The newcomer sat on the barstool nearest the counter's pass-through. He turned to Joe, offered his right hand, and said, "My name's Dave—Dave Wrigley." They shook hands. He turned to Frank and offered his hand again.

Frank shook it and said, "Frank here. Happy to have you visit. And that ancient Irish character next to you is Joe O'Hara, local realtor, school board member, owner of a vintage car, and soon-to-be town drunk."

Dave nodded and then asked Frank, "Would you mind pouring me a double bourbon with a sprinkle of water and two cubes of ice?" He put a ten-dollar bill on the countertop.

Frank poured the drink and slid it down the countertop to the stranger. He had noticed Dave's rugged boots, deeply tanned face, and worn Levi's pants. His beard was rather sparse, but had grown down to the top button of his shirt. His hair was in a ponytail, and both the beard and hair were black with streaks of gray.

“What brings you to our town?”

“Well, I’ve been here quite a bit, but I just haven’t had the time to make your acquaintance. I generally buy supplies, sleep overnight in the ‘El Cheapo Motel’ down the street, and leave the next day for the field.”

Joe asked, “Field? Are you a forester?”

“No, I’m a geologist. I’ve been out mapping another part of Hells Canyon.” He hesitated for a few seconds and then continued, “Sure is hot out there this summer. My thermometer read one hundred and twelve degrees yesterday around noon. The summer temperatures in Hells Canyon certainly are increasing. I reckon that global warming has arrived.”

Joe shook his head back and forth and said, “Hells Canyon is a dumb place to work. If the heat doesn’t kill you, the snakes and rapids will.”

“No problem. I’ve been working out there off and on for over twenty years, and I swim and raft in the river, so the rapids don’t bother me.”

“How about the rattlers?” Joe asked.

“I don’t bother them if they don’t bother me.”

“Don’t you kill them?” asked Joe. “I kill every one I see.”

“Only if they’re in my camp, and even most of those I carry to the river and let loose.”

“Carry them?” Joe looked anxious.

Frank stopped sweeping to listen.

“Yeah. I push down their heads with my hammer so they can’t move, and then I grab them behind the head and carry them either to the river or far away from camp.”

“Ever been bitten?”

“No, but I do worry about it because I’m generally out there alone.”

“You wouldn’t make it out if you were bitten,” Joe said matter-of-factly.

“Probably not,” Dave said. He downed the last of his bourbon.

Frank took the empty glass and raised his eyebrows. “Another?”

“Yes, please. A little more water this time, and in a larger glass.”

“You know the canyon well?” asked Frank.

“Yeah, I know it pretty well, but it’s never well enough.”

“Who really cares about the geology of Hells Canyon?” Joe asked.

“You know, Joe, I think that I’m only one of two or three other people who really care about it. I keep wondering why I keep coming back.”

“Why do you?” asked Joe.

Dave smiled. “Because it’s there?”

Frank and Joe both laughed. Joe said, “That ain’t the truth and we know it. Now tell us the real reason you work there.”

Before Dave could answer, Mike, the high school science teacher, walked in and sat down next to Joe. He introduced himself to Dave.

Joe said, “Dave is a Hells Canyon geologist and I just asked him why he works there.”

Mike smiled and said, “Good question. Would you mind telling us why and then telling us more about that canyon? We live so close, but our knowledge about that gorge is meager, very meager indeed.”

Dave sipped his bourbon and then set the glass down. He stared intently at the ice cubes and began swirling them around in the half-empty glass. The only other noises were the lively melody of Chet Atkins’ guitar from the jukebox and the roar of Jake Brakes from a passing truck.

“Those are good questions,” Dave said. “When I began my work, just about nothing at all was known about the geology of the canyon. I did a master’s thesis on a very small part of it and became so intrigued that I kept going back. The geologic story is complex and not yet completely understood. I reckon I’ll die before much more is known—not many people want to spend the time, energy, and money necessary to wrestle the remaining secrets out of her.”

Frank said, “Well, I guess for you it’s sort of like a mountain peak that has to be climbed. Am I right?”

“Yes, sir, it is. Damn, I love that canyon. I’ve spent so many hours in her grasp that I think of her as a sensual young woman. My wife even calls the canyon my mistress. She just shrugs when she sees me pacing the floor and organizing field gear. I’m so fortunate that she understands my passion.”

Mike said, “I took my students into the canyon last spring, all the way to Hells Canyon Dam. Majestic place! I had brought along a guide-book titled *Islands and Rapids*. It helped me understand the geology, but it just wasn’t thorough enough for me. I wanted to identify specific rock types, to know why different soils formed to support certain plants, and what animals, including birds, can be seen there.”

“You’d prefer a more general book?” Dave asked.

“Either that or take you along.”

“I’ll do that if we can arrange it.”

Frank put down his towel and asked, “Think I could come along?”

“Of course,” Dave said.

Joe looked at Dave and asked, “Is Hells Canyon really the deepest canyon in North America?”

“Well, below Hat Point in Oregon, it’s about fifty-six hundred feet deep, which is about a hundred feet deeper than any part of the Grand Canyon. On the Idaho side, where the canyon is a little more than eight thousand feet deep, it’s at least twenty feet deeper than the deepest part of Kings Canyon in California’s Sierra Nevada range. I’ve never studied the deep canyons of Alaska, but I think I might find deeper ones there. So, I say to people that Hells Canyon is the deepest major river canyon in the lower forty-eight states. And I also tell interested listeners there are submarine canyons offshore North America that put both Hells Canyon and the Grand Canyon to shame with regards to depth and overall size.”

“Wow! Hells Canyon is quite a gorge. I didn’t know all of that. Thanks.” Joe leaned back and took a sip of his beer.

Liz, preacher Johnny’s wife, hastened through the door while looking over her shoulder to make certain no one had seen her enter.

Her long blonde hair was tied back with a green silk ribbon. The ever-present shoulder pads jutted out like football pads beneath her yellow blouse.

She nodded to Frank, Joe, and Mike and introduced herself to Dave. “Welcome to our town. It’s a good one.”

“Thanks. I like it.”

Frank mixed Liz a Tom Collins as he told her about Dave’s line of work. She watched Dave’s face as Frank talked.

Mike asked, “So what do the rocks tell you?”

Dave swirled the ice cubes around in his glass and looked at the bottles on shelves behind the counter. He said, “Tough to know where to start. I guess I can tell you that the older rocks in the canyon, those below the horizontal lava flows, formed out in the ocean as islands and seamounts about 270 to 150 millions years ago. As you can read in the guidebook Mike was talking about, *Island and Rapids*, the islands and seamounts were transported by plate tectonics across part of the ancestral Pacific Ocean until they crashed into ancient North America. Lava covered these older rocks, and later earth forces lifted the land up. The Snake River cut the canyon in the last two to three million years.”

Liz said, “Whoa thar, rock man. Millions of years, ya say? All true Christians know that Hells Canyon opened when Christ was crucified.”

Dave raised his eyebrows.

Joe looked into his beer and shook his head. “Baptist preacher’s wife.”

Frank towed down the countertop while everyone waited for Dave to comment on Liz’s statement.

Dave thought for a bit and then drawled, “I’m not going to argue with you about the canyon’s origin. You’ve already made up your mind. However, I can give pretty decent proof of what I’ve said if you can open your mind a bit and forget about celestial answers to scientific questions.”

“Truth is truth no matter what you say, and I know the truth. I’m a student of the Bible.”

Dave chuckled and shook his head. He finished his drink and rose from the barstool. He shook hands all around. When he got to Liz he said, "It was nice to meet you, Liz, but there's one thought that I'd like to leave with you."

"And what is that?" She smiled as she waited for his answer.

"Take your head out of your ass."

The door slammed as he walked out.

No one said a thing, but both Joe and Mike had broad grins on their faces.

Liz, her face flushed by anger, waited a minute or so and then followed Dave through the door. It slammed again.

