

TVA Baby

By Terry Bisson

I'm a TVA baby. My father was a Yankee, from Michigan I think, one of those educated engineers who came down here to dam up the rivers and bring electric lights and indoor plumbing to the bedarkened South: FDR's potlatch. Then they all went off to the War and some returned and others didn't. It's Destiny that decides such things.

I fly a lot. I slept through the take-off from Nashville and woke up just in time to hear the man in the seat next to me say, "There's the Mississippi, Ned."

"Ned," the Ned he was talking to, was a boy of about eight in the window seat. I was in the aisle seat. I looked over them both, out the little oval window, and saw a long lake laid out like a coonskin, running north and south, with skinny legs of muddy water extending east and west.

"That's Kentucky Lake," I said. "Or Barkley, not the Mississippi."

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Kentucky Lake is the Tennessee River," I said, "dammed up by TVA. Barkley Lake is the Cumberland. Both run into the Ohio here, only twenty miles apart. We're still a hundred miles east of the Mississippi."

"Who is he?" asked "Ned" the kid.

"Some nosy A-hole," said the man. He was about forty with a flattop and an OpryLand tee shirt.

"I was just trying to be helpful," I said. "You got it wrong. It's against the law to mislead children!" It should be, anyway.

"Can I help?" asked the stewardess. "Please don't shout."

"Sorry," I said. I almost never shout. "I'm a TVA baby. This ignoramus in the middle seat is so ignorant that he thinks Kentucky Lake is the Mississippi River!"

"I am a Lieutenant Commander in the US Navy," he said. "On vacation, and I do believe I know a lake from a river."

"I can see how one could make that mistake," I said. Though I couldn't help adding: "Though I am dismayed to learn that a US naval officer could be so ignorant as to the geographic layout of the country he is supposedly supposed to defend."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Ned," the man said. "He's crazy."

I hear that a lot. I wanted to kill him. I usually carry a gun for just such occasions, but they are no longer allowed on commercial flights, so I rammed the heel of my hand upward into his nose and drove the bone into his brain, such as it was.

Well, then, all hell broke loose. So to speak. First of all, there was the blood; you hardly ever see blood on a commercial flight. And then he was making this honking noise, trying to breathe and spraying blood all over the magazines in the seat pocket, and the back of the seat as well. Then he jerked once and died,

but it was too late. All the other passengers were standing up, trying to get out of their seats, which are all jammed together, economy-class-wise, so it was like a little mini-riot. And here was the stewardess, excuse me, flight attendant, back again.

“Sir, sir,” she was saying, meaning, of course, me. One only gets called “sir” by cops and such, so I got alarmed. Sure enough, there was a big guy behind me, trying to grab my arms and waving plastic handcuffs.

You can imagine the chaos. I figured it was time to split. The big guy wasn’t so big with a fork in his carotid, even a plastic fork will do if you know how to wield it. I jammed him facedown between the seats to bleed out and grabbed the gun out of his ankle holster, and there’s nothing like a gun, even a little one, to cool things out. It’s like waving a magic wand. Everybody got real quiet.

Even the kid was quiet. The “Ned.” He was watching me like a hawk or maybe an owl, all owl-eyed.

The gun was a big help. I used it to direct the attendant to the back of the plane. The aisle was clear. Everybody was sitting down again, watching me. I stopped on the way to get my carry-on out of the overhead.

“Open it,” I said, pointing with the gun at the Emergency Exit door. They’re good for pointing.

“Not not not allowed,” she said with a combination of words and almost illegible (is that the word?) gestures, but I wasn’t about to take no for an answer. Only authorized personnel are allowed to operate Emergency Exits, so I made her pull the big handle Out, then Up (as instructed by the decal).

It opened with a big *whoosh* that ripped the door right off, no surprise: it’s windy out there at five-hundred-plus mph. She was still holding on, so she went with it, spinning like a top. Anybody could see everything up that short dress. Meanwhile, the kid had left his seat and was holding onto my leg for dear life as if he were trying to tackle me, so he went with me when I dove out after her.

He was wearing an OpryLand tee shirt like his “dad” and trying to bite me, so I shook him off. He could have stayed in his seat, and should have, but he didn’t. We fell side by side for a minute or so (or so it seemed; it was probably less) with him reaching out for something to grab, while I unzipped my carry-on, and then he was gone.

* * *

How many guys carry a parasail in their carry-on? If that question was asked of, say, a studio audience, only one person in the audience could raise his hand legitimately.

That would be me.

I could see the flight attendant getting smaller and smaller below as I adjusted my parasail for the optimum glide angle. The kid, too. I never saw either of them actually hit, but I figured it had to be bad. Meanwhile, it was cold and it takes a certain concentration to fly those things, even though it looks easy. It’s the things that look easiest that are the hardest, often.

I descended in big circles. That way you can study the scene below and look for a good place to land. There was Kentucky Lake and Barkley Lake, side by side, and the Ohio River to the north. It felt good to see that I had been right all along, even though I had never doubted it. It was nice to know that my actions had been justified all along.

I concentrated on my glide angle, and when I looked down again there was only one lake in sight. I didn’t know which one, not that it mattered; they are both just alike.

I was trying to decide whether to land on the water or on the shore, which was all stickers it looked like, when I saw the boat.

It was barely put-putting along, a houseboat with a flat roof. I made a pretty soft landing, and almost “stuck it” except for getting my feet tangled in a plastic rope somebody had left up there. But no big deal.

I must have made a *thump* because two people came out of the cabin onto this little deck in back, and they were staring up at me. One of them was a girl in a bikini. The other was this fat hillbilly type guy in one of those free hats they love, only this one had a gold anchor on the front, like that made him a sea captain or something. He looked pissed. I could see that this was going to be one of those days.

“Hey!” he said.

“Hey yourself,” I replied, and I shot him purely as a precaution. It was the first time I had actually fired the gun. I thought I had missed, because he just sort of sat down, and I was about to shoot again, but then I saw the blood spreading all over the front of his shirt like a map, and I clicked the safety on. I had no idea how many shots were in the gun. I didn’t even know what kind it was! You know how it is when you get busy, and I was still in action mode.

I took a minute to examine it. It was a Glock nine, so I figured if the clip was full (and why wouldn’t it be?) there were still six or seven shots left. No point in wasting them, though. I climbed down to the rear deck on a little ladder that was there just for that purpose and almost kicked over a tackle box that was at the bottom, like a step. All the shit inside was rusty but there was a knife, of course. There is no such thing as a tackle box without a knife, in my experience. Though how they ever cleaned fish with that one is beyond me. I had to use it like a saw to open his throat.

Then I realized that the girl was gone. How unlike me to forget a girl in a bikini! The door to the cabin was glass and I could see her inside. She was holding a shotgun in one hand and opening drawers with the other like crazy. I figured she was looking for shells. The door was locked but I kicked it till it splintered and smashed my way in and took the shotgun away from her, and just in time, there were the shells, in the last drawer.

I scooped up five and loaded the shotgun, a Mossberg 500, and stuck the pistol in my belt. No point in waving both around. She was backed up against a little orange couch and I sat her down, with a push, just to let her know who was now in charge. Now the Captain, as it were.

Meanwhile, the houseboat was going in circles, so I took the wheel and straightened it out. I had had enough of circles descending! It was a little wooden wheel with spokes, just like a ship would have, only much smaller. An aftermarket add-on, no doubt.

The girl was just sitting there watching me. Woman, really, but I like to call them girls. She looked real cute in her bikini, and I told her so.

She didn’t say anything.

“What lake are we on?” I asked, to break the ice. Plus I was curious.

Her mouth moved but she didn’t say anything.

“Barkley Lake or Kentucky Lake?” I asked, to help her out.

“B-Barkley,” she said.

I nodded as if I had known all along; and in a sense, I had, within a fifty percent margin of error. I knew it

had to be one or the other, which was where this whole business had started.

She kept staring out the door toward the rear deck, which was a mess. I had gone a little overboard, so to speak, and the guy's head was half off. She looked kind of horrified, which was understandable, so I made her stand up and take the wheel (which would keep her looking straight ahead, or so I thought!) while I went out and "tidied up" as my mother used to say. The deck was slick with all that helpful blood and the dead guy just slid right off, under the railing and into the water.

When I came back in I was wearing the "Captain's hat," which I thought was a nice touch. The girl was still freaked out though. Which was understandable. The guy could have been her father or her husband, either one. She was about twenty-something.

She looked real cute in her bikini and I told her so.

"D-don't," she said.

Apparently she stuttered. I pretended not to notice. When I was a kid I knew a guy in Boy Scouts who stuttered and we all pretended not to notice, to spare his feelings. I say "all"; *some* of us pretended not to notice while others were more cruel. I used to tell them, "Cruelty is not a merit badge," which it isn't.

"D-don't," she said again. She was backed up against the wheel, staring at me instead of steering.

Don't what? But I knew what she was thinking. "Don't worry," I said. "I'm a TVA baby."

That got her attention. I turned her around and showed her how to hold the wheel so the boat would go straight. I showed her from behind, being careful not to bump up against her bikini. She was finding it hard to relax.

Meanwhile, I had other problems. The gas gauge, which I could see over her strapless shoulder, was on empty! They must have been bringing the boat in when I had arrived, seemingly out of nowhere. In fact, I could see the marina, up ahead about a half a mile, tucked into a cove along the shore.

They say that when one door shuts another opens. I pointed at the marina, and she said "Aye aye, sir." Not really, but that's what I imagined she might have said had she been more relaxed. She steered straight for it, though.

Houseboats are nothing if not slow, so I fished a cigarette out of my carry-on and went out onto the tiny little front deck for a smoke. I offered her one but she apparently didn't smoke. Or maybe she had been trying to quit.

High up above I could see the vapor trail of the jet, already being scattered by the stratospheric winds. Ahead, in the water, I could see something that looked like a log.

I checked it out as we putted by, at about the speed of a walk-on-the-water walk. It was the flight attendant, with her arms and legs stretched out, as if she were still falling through the air. Transitions are like that: the old persists into the new. She was face down in the water, so I figured she hadn't survived the fall, which people rarely do, so I signaled the girl to just keep us going, which she did. I was worried about the gas.

Another "log" was coming up, and this one was the little boy. The kid. "Ned." He was face up and his eyes were open so I grabbed his legs and pulled him on board, still without slowing down. I figured a lot of starting and stopping was the last thing we needed.

"Where am I?" he asked.

“Barkley Lake,” I said. “It’s the Cumberland River dammed up. TVA.”

“Where’s my dad?”

I pointed up. You could still see what was left of the vapor trail, but the plane was long gone.

“You killed him,” he said.

“You don’t know that for sure,” I said. Actually, I had, but the last thing I needed was some hysterical kid on my hands. His clothes were all wet and his bones were all broken, so I scooped him up and put him inside on the little orange sofa. I propped him up and sat the girl down beside him. The marina was coming up and it was time for me to take the wheel.

“This is ‘Ned,’” I said. I didn’t know her name.

“He killed my father,” the kid said. She just stared at him, horrified, then at me.

“It was his own fault,” I explained back over my shoulder while I steered. “All this is top secret. Navy business. I’m a Navy Seal, and I was sent to take care of him. It’s OK.”

None of this was strictly true, but I have read about the Navy Seals. They are a tough bunch of customers.

“Really?” he asked.

“Shut up,” I said.

That shut him up, for a while. Meanwhile, the girl was eyeing the water, like she wanted to dive in and escape, which she could have done in her bikini, so I tied her legs together with a piece of plastic rope. It was time for me to concentrate on pulling in at the marina, which I did. Very smoothly, I might add.

The gas guy came out to help us tie up. Another hillbilly, also wearing a captain’s anchor hat. He saw all the blood on the rear deck and registered alarm, saying:

“What the fuck?”

“Help,” said the girl, speaking up, finally.

“He killed my dad,” the kid said.

They were both trying to get me in trouble. The gas guy was backing away, still registering alarm, so I killed him with the shotgun as a precaution. It made a mess of his face and the girl started screaming. I should have aimed lower.

Luckily, there seemed to be no one else around.

I had to help her off the boat, since her legs were tied together; and I had to carry the kid, since all his bones were broken. It was turning out to be one of those days.

“Stop that damn screaming,” I said, and she did. I sat her down beside the kid and instructed her to sit tight while I checked out the cars in the parking lot. I had had enough of boats, and how many guys carry a key for every kind of car in their carry-on? Pickups, too.

Again, mine would be the only hand raised.

I wanted something inconspicuous, so I settled on a Camry and put the kid and the girl in the back seat. First I made sure the gas gauge said full. On second thought, I made the girl in the bikini ride up front with me, where I could keep an eye on her.

“Fasten your seat belts,” I said. “We’re in for a bumpy ride.” That’s from a Bette Davis movie. You’ll never see Bette Davis in a bikini. And it was pretty bumpy till we got to the highway, then it smoothed out, suddenly.

“I want my mother,” said the kid from the back seat.

“Then you’re in luck,” I said. “She’s your mother now. And I’m your new dad. We’re on our way to get married as soon as we find a preacher.”

All white lies, of course. I’m a TVA baby, not about to marry her or anybody for that matter. But the last thing I needed was a homesick kid on my hands.

“Isn’t that right, honey?” I asked.

She was no help. Her eyes were closed. We were doing about ninety. I could see the kid in the back, in the rear-view mirror. His eyes were wide open. “You killed my dad,” he said.

His was a real one-note song.

“The Navy sent me,” I persisted. “I’m a Blue Angel. I’m your new dad. And she’s your new mom. It’s all going to be OK as soon as we find us a preacher.”

“It was OK before,” he said. I could tell he didn’t believe me.

“Just shut up,” I said. I looked for something on the radio. To my surprise, they were already going on about the plane and the door and all the people falling out. Apparently there were others. I figured they must have radioed down the news and got everybody all stirred up.

Sure enough, there was a roadblock up ahead -- two cop cars in a V formation, and a bunch of “smokies” with those hats and vests and the like. Luckily, I was prepared for just such an eventuality. How many guys carry RPGs in their carry-ons? I took out one cop car, and sped through the rubble on cruise control. The smokies all jumped out of the way, all but one. The rest were shooting but they can’t shoot worth a dime. I thought things would settle down once we got past, but the ones that survived insisted on following like a swarm of angry bees.

My left rear tire was thumping so I guess they weren’t such bad shots after all. Apologies, etc. Luckily, there was a Wal-Mart just ahead. They carry everything.

One thing I hate about Wal-Mart is the way they are all over you as soon as you walk in, saying, “How can I help you today?” It’s like they are in a hurry to get you out of there. They don’t bother you, though, when you are waving a shotgun like a magic wand. Everybody sort of melted away as soon as we came in. It was almost like the place was empty, except I figured there were people ducked down here and there in the various aisles.

I dumped the kid into a shopping cart and made the girl push it. Her legs were still tied together, so she had to sort of hop. How often do you see a girl in a bikini in Wal-Mart? She looked cute and I told her so, but she just glared at me. I got some cereal and milk for later, and some bullets and a little hiking tent. It was time to give up on the car. The bullets were hollow points. “Do you know how to set up a tent?” I asked the kid.

He wasn't speaking either. Believe me, I was getting tired of these two! There was no time to waste, so I raced to the check-out area. They have several lanes but they were all empty; no check-out girls.

I wasn't about to stand on ceremony. "Looks like we get a freebie," I said.

Then I saw the check-out girl hiding under the counter, her make-up all smeared. I made her stand up and reached into my pocket for my billfold. I wanted to make things as legal as possible under the circumstances, as long as it didn't take too long, but wouldn't you know it, my billfold was missing! I figured it must have fallen out of my pocket somewhere in the descent from the commercial airliner, earlier. That's why parachutists wear special pants, with all those special pockets, I suppose.

"J-just g-go," the check-out girl said. She was also afflicted with a stutter. I was running out of patience, so I made her give me all the money out of the cash register, and gave her two twenties back.

"Keep the change," I said. It was a joke but she didn't get it. Neither did the kid.

"You can't pay her with her own money," he said. "That doesn't count."

Now he was mister logic. He was all folded up in the cart, like a rubber midget, with his eyes wide open. "Navy Seals don't steal," he said.

"Sometimes they do," I said. "I'm a Blue Angel anyway." I did my hands like wings.

"No you're not," he said. "You're a TVA baby."

He said it with a certain admiration in his eyes, so I told him the truth, which was that indeed I was. I was tired of pretending anyway. "Now you know why that 'dad' of yours had to die," I said. "He had it all wrong."

He just stared at me, all owl-eyed. I peeled off another twenty, to make it up to him. His fingers weren't broken but his arms were, so I stuck it in his wet shirt pocket. That took some doing. Meanwhile, I had forgotten the girl in the bikini. She was trying to hop away. I caught up with her, no big deal, and herded her back with the shotgun and said, "Now, let's get the hell out of here, on the double!"

Easier said than done. We started out the door but the parking lot out front was filled with police cars, all with blue lights flashing. There were Darth Vader types in black helmets crouched behind them, looking ready for action.

"Change in plans," I said.

"N-no shit, Sherlock," said the girl. She was getting saucy. I liked that. I gave her a twenty and she stuck it down the front of her bikini. I liked that too. I gave her another, then steered her and the cart toward the back of the store. It was slow going with her hopping, but I couldn't help push the cart since I had my carry-on in one hand and the shotgun in the other.

It wasn't my job to push anyway.

"Y-you're t-toast," she said. She was still stuttering, or maybe it was the hopping. I decided to ignore her. Besides, I had other things on my mind. I knew that if I could get to the loading dock I could escape into the woods out back. There's a woods behind every Wal-Mart.

Unfortunately, the loading dock was also filled with pissed-off-looking Darth Vader types.

"T-trapped!" she said. She seemed pleased. I was getting tired of her shit. "Don't be so sure," I snarled.

I poked her in the butt with the shotgun and we headed for the TV section, which is, in my opinion, the nicest part of the store. All those TVs going at once, all tuned to the same station. It's almost like home.

They were all showing the "Breaking News," which was the scene out front, the parking lot crowded with cop cars with blue lights flashing. There was even a helicopter. It was Live.

"You're toast," she said again. I never liked that expression. Toast always seemed to me like something nice. I was explaining this to her and the kid while I was setting up the tent (they were no help) when she said, "I don't know why you keep talking to him. He's dead."

I stopped, taken aback.

So that was it! The open eyes had fooled me. But what about all the things he had said? Had I only imagined he was talking to me? It was entirely possible, I knew. Perhaps he had been dead all along. There was no way to know for sure. He was cold but that could have been the water. His clothes were still wet.

"So what," I said, to give the impression that I had known all along. I made her get in the tent and topped off the pistol with the hollow points. The shotgun still had four shells.

Meanwhile, on the TV, all the Darth Vader types were coming in the front door. I turned around to look and, sure enough, I could see them toward the front of the store, darting around the aisles, trying to stay out of my line of sight.

They were moving in from the loading dock, too. Luckily, I still had a trick or two up my sleeve. How many guys carry a universal remote in their carry-on? (Raise your hand!) I flipped around until I had Oprah on all the screens. I was waiting for her to stop talking when one screen exploded. They were shooting.

I stood up and emptied a clip and sent a bunch of shit flying, and that quieted them down again. They are kind of chicken shit, really. But there was a bunch of them and they were getting closer. I really needed to get out of there.

Oprah was still yakking away. I crouched down and flipped around till I got Ellen. That's more my kind of show anyway. I watch it all the time. You can't even tell she's a lesbian, not that that matters to anybody anymore.

"You," Ellen said. "What do you want?" She didn't look pleased to see me, but I'm used to that. I'm a TVA baby.

"I want to be on your show," I said.

"I told you, I don't arrange that," she said. "That's all arranged through the producer."

"It's an emergency," I said. "Can't we make an exception just this once?"

I pointed toward the front of the store, where the Darth Vader types were still filtering in, all crouched down. But of course, Ellen couldn't see *out of* the TV.

"It's not up to me," she said. "It seems to people like it is, but actually it's not."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Try Wild Kingdom."

That was an idea. I flipped around till I found it. Two lions were eating an antelope, one from the front and one from the back.

I flipped back to Ellen. “No way,” I said. I told her what I had seen and she gave a little shudder. “I can’t believe that’s what they call appropriate programming for children,” she said.

“Meanwhile, we have a problem here,” I said. “They’re closing in and there’s at least a hundred of them.” That was an exaggeration but not by much. Down every aisle I could see crouching shapes, darting here and there.

“I have a guest,” Ellen said. Sure enough, she was standing up to hug some guy in jeans and a sport coat. Some lucky dude.

“What about me?” I asked. “What am I supposed to do?”

She shrugged. “Shoot it out?”

That was no help. Oprah would have said the same. I was beginning to see that they were all cut out of the same piece of cloth. They want no surprises on their shows. I could even understand their point of view but meanwhile I had enough to worry about, with the Darth Vader types showing up down almost every aisle.

I fired off another clip, my last.

“You’re trapped,” said the girl in the bikini. She was peering out the window of the tent. I made her zip it shut from inside and told her to shut her pie hole while I went to the guns & ammo section. I had to crawl. I had to break the glass. I was reloading with hollow points when I heard a voice over the store’s PA system:

“Drop the gun and come out with your hands on your head!”

It’s usually used to announce sales and such. I guess they figured it made them sound more official, and to be perfectly honest, it did. It gave me a shiver.

I was getting worried.

I crawled back to the TV section. A guy tried to stop me on the way but he was too slow, and I wasted him with one shot. The hollow points expand. Somebody pulled him out of the way, sliding him back in his own helpful blood. The dudes were everywhere.

I had a sinking feeling when I saw the tent, and when I picked up one side to look underneath, sure enough, the girl was gone, bikini and all. She had somehow split the scene.

Now there was just me and the kid, who was still in the shopping cart, and dead besides. “Ned” was no help. Another TV exploded but there were still plenty left.

I tried Ellen again. “What about the studio audience?” I suggested.

She ignored me, as was often her wont. Meanwhile, bullets were flying all around. Not one to stand on ceremony, I squeezed on through, and just in time. Bullets were smacking into my flesh.

The chairs for the studio audience were arranged in rows, on low risers. None had arms. Everybody was watching Ellen, who was holding a puppy on her lap.

“Scoot,” I said, but all I got were blank looks. Scoot, it turns out, was the name of the puppy.

“Scoot over!” I said in a loud whisper, to which I added a snarl, and over they scooted, all of them at once.

And just in time for the commercial break. The lights went weird. I took my seat just in time as Ellen looked up from her puppy and asked, pretending to be interested (they are always pretending), “And how many TVA babies do we have in our studio audience today?”

Mine was, as always, as ever, the only hand raised.

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