

Mangrove Underground

By Tim W. Jackson

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And then, after paddling daylong among the overgrown Calusa shell-mounds, they reached the Dogwater groundsite. The river shone dull orange with the setting sun. James Gates, in the lead canoe, raised his paddle, a racer crossing the finish line, a silhouette suspended in the fog wisps rising from the water. The boy dug his paddle deep, letting the brackish water cool his hands. The canoe angled left as his mother ruddered them closer to shore.

The Park Service dock, even with the top of the riverbank, loomed five feet above Ben's head. Low tide. He reached for the nearest piling, then pulled back as clumps of mud scuttled away from his hand. More fiddler crabs scurried across the undersides of the planks above. Ben leaned away as far as he could.

"Come on, son. Time's a-wasting!" His father's head and shoulders appeared above him.

A wooden ramp sloped up at the end of the dock, its planks coated in mud. Ben eased a foot onto the ramp, slipped and landed on his knees. Leaning on his paddle, he pulled himself up the mud-slicked wood slat-by-slat.

James Gates grabbed Ben's arm and pulled him to the top of the bank. "Damn, son. You got more swamp on you than around you."

Beyond the dock the mangrove wall opened into a clearing big enough for several tents. In the center sat a weathered picnic table. James Gates' hand was warm, heavy on Ben's shoulder.

"We get us a fire going, this'll feel like home."

"I could use some help here!" Beth Gates' voice drifted from the dock.

Ben's dad winked at him. "Yankees," he said. Ben smiled, knowing what was coming.

"What are you two whispering about up there?"

"About how city folks are always in a hurry," James Gates called back. "Never taking time to relax, enjoy life."

"Same people who go hungry because they're too busy relaxing to unload the food?"

"Us swamp men are busy up here. Chasing off panthers and bears and skunk apes." He winked at Ben again. "Start on that tent, son. We'll be back directly."

The mangroves crowded twice Ben's height around the campsite. His parents' voices drifted through the clearing, pushing back the gathering fog. He unrolled the tent by the picnic table, facing the water. More fog rolled up from the river, nuzzling through the mangrove limbs. On the dock, his parents were dark forms in the thickening air, lifting boxes and duffel bags onto the dock. Something rustled in the mangroves to his right, then to his left. Ben froze, wide-eyed, expecting yellow panther eyes staring back at him, or charging bears.

“This fog can be kind of spooky, can’t it?” His mom set a small ice chest on the table.

“No. Are there really bears here?”

“Your father’s just playing with you.” She knelt so her eyes were level with his. “There are bears in the swamp. It’s their home, and we’re the visitors. But with us making this much noise, they’re a long way from here.”

“There’s things . . . watching us.”

She slid an arm around his shoulders. “You mean the Nunnehi.”

Ben spun, expecting dark shapes to spring from the fog.

“It’s OK,” she laughed. “The Calusas said spirit people – the Nunnehi – lived out here. They looked after hunters and travelers, kept them safe, guided them back to their homes.” She smoothed his hair, eased him back down. “All these clearings we camp in? They’re Nunnehi Rings – the safest places in the swamp. You’re pretty sharp. You feel them checking on us, making sure we’re all right.”

Ben shivered despite the humid air. He didn’t believe her, but he didn’t want her to stop talking. Or to know he was worried by the swamp sounds.

“There was a boy who got lost near here once. About your age.” She squeezed his shoulders to make sure he was listening. “He’d been out fishing, went too far and fell asleep in his boat. Sound familiar?”

He shrugged, intent on the rustlings beyond in the brush. He wasn’t afraid. And wouldn’t be.

“Well, when he woke it was dark and foggy. Just like this. You can imagine how . . . nervous he was. After a few minutes he heard noises. Voices. People to help him

find his way. He didn't want the other people to know he was nervous, so instead of calling out, he paddled his skiff toward them. The people moved away, always just beyond where he could see. He followed for what felt like forever, through all sorts of twists and turns and side channels, deep among the mounds, until his arms were numb and he felt he couldn't paddle anymore.

“He was about to give up when he saw the yellowy light of a campfire. He steered his skiff to shore and found himself in a clearing – this clearing – where a group of people were camped. Their clothes and gear were strange, like the old-time reenactors we saw that time, but he was so happy to finally find people he didn't pay much attention. They gave him hot chocolate, and some stew, and let him stay in their big tent that night. In the morning the boy woke with the sun bright on his face. The tent, the people, the fire pit, everything was gone except his canoe. That's when he realized there had been no other boats on the shore the night before, even though a boat's the only way to get here.

“Can you imagine how nervous he was then? He raced home as fast as he could, not daring to tell his parents what had happened, afraid they would think he was crazy, or making it up.”

Ben's eyes were bright, seeing pavilion tents and magical lights sprouting around him.

"You're lucky," his mom said. "Most people never realize the Nunnehi are out here. They're too busy to trust their feelings or really respect the wilderness." She smoothed his hair again. "The Nunnehi will watch over us all night."

"And grab you while you sleep!"

Ben jumped at his dad's growl.

"James, you're not helping," his mom laughed. "Your father doesn't believe anything he can't see."

"Fog's just fog," his dad said. "Anything in the bushes looking at me better be careful. I might look back."

"He grew up out here, but there's still things he can't see." Beth Gates was smiling, looking past Ben, toward his dad.

"I want religion, I'll go to church." James Gates grinned. "The swamp was here long before tree huggers came along to make it warm and fuzzy." He tapped the side of his head and raised his eyebrows. "That's what college does to you, boy. Remember that."

Ben half-heard them. He peered into the fog, eager for any movement, not believing the story, but wanting to.

After dinner by the fire, Ben followed his dad to the dock. The foggy air felt thick in his lungs. Away from the fire, he could have been walking through a cloud, the dirt beneath his boots the only thing solid. Then broad planks appeared at his feet. The dock. Four more steps and they were at the corner, where the L-shaped dock turned and ran parallel with the river. His dad squatted and checked the lines holding the canoes.

Frogs screeched below the dock, in the trees behind, and across the river. Mosquitoes buzzed. Down the shore something cried out, a low keening at water level.

"Night heron," his dad murmured.

Metal clanked at the far end of the dock, near the ramp down to the river. A globe of dim yellow light floated at ground level, then disappeared below. His mom, going to

scrub the aluminum plates and pans. More clanking, water splashed, and his mom's humming floated up through the fog.

"Nothing out here that don't belong." His father spoke quietly. "Fog, frogs, gators. You, if you're lucky. Trick is figuring where you fit in. Or letting the swamp show you."

Ben squatted, copying his father. The fog pressed the sounds and smells close around him. The reek of mud filled him, coated him.

"You listen, let everything settle around you," his dad said. "Get to a point, you feel like the swamp accepts you, and you go quiet and careful then, not wanting to spoil that."

Neither spoke for several minutes. Ben picked out new sounds around him. Tree frogs chirping at a higher pitch than those under the dock. Something small, mousy, moving in the brush behind him. Metallic scraping as his mom scrubbed at the dried cheese in the big stew pot. Canoes thumping softly against the pilings below. Upriver and midstream, something like steam escaping a vent, quickly shut off, then a splash of something slipping into the water. The sound repeated, then two, four, five times all at once, moving toward the dock.

"Dolphins," his dad whispered. "Six, maybe seven. Tide's bringing out all kinds of little fish for them."

Ben strained to see through the fog as the sounds drew even with the dock then passed on. "How'd they get here?"

"The Gulf's only a few miles downstream. Remember?"

He squatted, stock-still, listening for the whispers of spirit people, anything more than the night breeze among unseen tree limbs, the scrape of pans. He breathed light so as not to disturb anything around him, safe between his parents.

His mom yelled. Pans clattered at the base of the ramp. She yelled again, louder. His dad was running down the dock before Ben could move. She screamed, her voice finally forming a word.

"James!"

When Ben reached the end of the dock his dad was pulling her up the ramp. Her right arm was tucked to her chest, her left hand locked on her wrist.

"It looked like a stick the current washed up," she said. "I pushed it away and it bit me!"

"What kind?" His dad shooed him back.

"The black kind! The biting kind!"

"Ben! The med kit! Go!"

Ben ran for the campsite, his father's heavy footsteps behind him, carrying his mother back.

By the time Ben found the first aid kit, his mother was lying on the table, his father hunched over her. His dad snatched at the kit from him and dug for the snakebite kit. His mom yelled as his dad cut her hand. Dark blood oozed where the knife touched her skin. Ben turned away. This wasn't his mom. Not helpless, screaming like this. He shut his eyes tight as he could. She would be fine. It was just a snake.

His dad bandaged her hand and helped her into the tent, then crawled back out.

“She’ll be fine. A little sore, but . . .” Ben had never heard his dad’s voice shake like this. His dad stared into the fog, eyes unfocused. “She’ll be fine . . . We need a doctor.”

Ben jumped up, grabbed a paddle.

“Whoa, son! Think, then act.” His dad spread a chart across the table and tapped a black tepee-shape near the top edge. “We’re here. Dogwater groundsite. Nearest help we know of is Silver Bay research hut. Should at least be a radio there.” His finger tapped a patch of blue two chart folds away. Ben listened, but knew his dad was talking to himself. “Six, maybe eight hours hard paddling. In the morning. We miss a turn at night . . . We can’t waste time. We won’t waste time.” He leaned on the chart, like he was holding it down in a stiff wind. “High tide, the best way’s here, through the Tangles.”

“Tangles?”

“It’s real narrow. And shallow.” His finger zig-zagged across the map, following a thin blue squiggle winding south through the green of mangroves. “Comes out here. Tarpon River. Then straight up to Silver Bay. No time to run down to the Gulf and back up.”

“When’s high tide?”

“Dunno. Need a tide chart.”

“What’s that?”

Remember that piece of paper with the river names and all the numbers? The one you set on the bags yesterday, that the wind blew away?”

Ben felt sick. He looked away, into the fog, squeezed his arms tight across his ribs. “Are there snakes? In the Tangles”

His dad lay a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We’ll do alright. Lord willing and the tide cooperates.”

His mom moaned then, and his dad ducked into the tent. Ben stuffed gear into duffle bags as fast as he could. He heard his mom’s voice quiet, strained.

“You and Ben are going to paddle us all that way?”

“Well, I don’t know about Ben.” A forced laugh from his dad. “Reckon he can set in the bow and shove branches out of the way.”

The fog closed in around Ben at that. His parents’ voices blended into the hum of mosquitoes and frogs. He was useless. No. He could have everything packed, ready to go in the morning. The cooking box sat open beside him. Something cold slid down his back. The cook kit was still at the river. Ben climbed onto the table, watching the gray swirls that hid the river. He would leave them for his dad to get – the last thing they tossed in the canoe as they cast off. With all the fog, he wasn’t even sure where the dock was.

‘We can’t waste time,’ his dad had said

He could miss the dock completely, fall down the riverbank. And if he did find the dock, the ramp was still slick. It was dangerous to try. Ben wanted to swallow, but his mouth was too dry.

‘I don’t know about Ben,’ echoed through his head. He could do more than shove branches. *‘We can’t waste time.’* Ben grabbed a flashlight and a paddle, stepped with numb legs toward the river.

“Nunnehi?” he whispered. His mom’s story came fresh into his head. He felt foolish calling out, but if there really were spirit people, his mom needed them. Nothing moved in the fog, but he felt stronger as he said the word. “Nunnehiiii,” he said louder.

Ben stepped through the mangroves, holding the paddle in front of him. The mud smell hit him then, as the swamp had exhaled in his face. His breathing drowned out the frogs. The packed mud in the milky oval of the flashlight was all he could see as he counted off ten, a dozen shuffle-steps.

Then there were boards at his feet, sloping to the river. He shone the light down the ramp. The water had risen, swirling black around the pilings. His light glinted off three aluminum pots at the water’s edge.

Ben looked behind him, hoping to see his dad, or a ghostly Nunnehi. There was only the camp fire’s yellow glow. They didn’t need the pans. If the water kept rising, it would wash them away. A snake could be anywhere down there. Under the ramp. Coiled in the mangrove roots. Curled around a pot so it looked like a shadow. He could tell his dad . . . No. He couldn’t.

He reached the paddle as far as he could and tapped the boards. There was a hollow thump, but nothing moved. He hit the ramp again, harder. The boards boomed. He hit them again and again until he felt the vibration in the hard mud under his feet and heard the pots rattle at the water. Still nothing moved.

Holding his breath, he edged down the ramp sideways, holding the paddle like a machete. He dug the edges of his boots into the slick mud, whispering, “Nunnehi, Nunnehi,” with each step. The air cooled as he neared the water. Ben reached with the

paddle and slid the pots and plates up the ramp one at a time. He pressed them against his chest to stop them from rattling, then scrambled up the ramp and ran for the campfire.

At the camp, Ben climbed on the table again and closed his eyes, trying to stop shaking. From the tent could hear his mom's voice, but not her words. His dad kept saying, "You'll be alright, Beth. You'll be alright."

A scuffling noise, footsteps, woke Ben. The fog was brighter. Somewhere above the white glow an osprey cried.

"Come on, son. Time's a-wasting." James Gates' eyes were dark, like he'd been hit. He had an arm around Ben's mom, walking her to the river. She looked half asleep, her face stretched and pale.

"Hey, Ben," she whispered. "You get things cleaned up?"

"Ma'am?"

"Packed up, I mean?" She held her hand across her chest. He choked and stepped back. Her hand had been replaced with something black and puffy, like an inflated rubber glove stuck on her arm. Knuckles, wrist bones had all been swallowed under skin stretched tight up to her elbow.

"Ben?" His dad's voice was too high. "I need you to hold a canoe steady while we get her situated. You do that?"

Ben ran for the river. He stumbled on a root, caught himself. The jolt cleared his mind. His mom was hurt. If they failed . . . He had to help his dad, help his mom.

His dad had rigged one canoe with a domed covering of branches and a blue poncho, a sleeping bag spread beneath it. Ben glanced at the mangrove roots snaking

through the water, then pulled the canoe to the ramp. His mom pressed something into his hand as he helped ease her into the canoe.

“You’re the navigator, Ben. This’ll help you find your way.”

Ben stared at the Silva compass she used to guide them through the backcountry every trip. He nodded, then climbed into the bow, setting the compass on his knee as he’d seen his mother do so often. He would get them through. It was his duty now.

The canoe rolled slightly as they pushed off. The mangrove shoreline faded into the fog. In a few seconds Ben could barely see individual trees. They kept close to shore, the bank a dark smudge to their left. Southwest, the compass read. Ben dug his paddle into the river and listened to the water gurgle on either side of the bow. He leaned forward until he couldn’t see the canoe, as if they were flying, making up for time lost.

A dark post loomed to the left. Then Ben saw the orange reflectors and the red-bordered triangle of the channel marker nailed to its top.

"Heads up, son." It could have been one word. "Watch for more markers." The canoe cut toward the post.

The shore parted as they neared, separated into trees on either side, and they were off the Dogwater and into a wide creek. The creek split, and they edged toward a vague channel marker near the right fork. Roots and fallen branches crowded in, sticking up from the water, scraping the canoe. Branches arched overhead, dripping dew. They had to slow as the branches hung lower, thicker. Wet leaves brushed Ben’s arms. There was a scraping sound, and he turned to see the branch-and-poncho canopy slide over his dad’s head and fall behind the canoe.

"Go, Ben! Go!" His dad yelled.

"James!" his mom whispered. "He's doing everything he can. You both are."

Ben tried to look away from her, but couldn't.

"Paddle!" His dad was a stranger, eyes so dark, face so drawn. His dad was scared. Only his dad didn't get scared. Ben looked at his mom lying with her eyes closed. His paddle shook, clattering on the gunwales.

"Ben." His dad's murmur was loud in the still air. "We need to get through this creek quick like the bunny, without hurting your mama, alright?"

Ben dug his paddle deep. The blade caught on the creek bottom, and he dragged the canoe forward. Soon he was grabbing branches and pulling them along. Twice they climbed out to float the canoe over downed trees. He cringed at his mom's moans when they bumped against unavoidable branches.

The fog swirled through the brush, rising in slender shapes that evaporated when Ben looked too close. He imagined the shapes were Nunnehi guiding him through the Tangles. He whispered so only he could hear, asking them to help. The shapes clustered thicker ahead, and he paddled harder, trying to catch up. He was sure they were waving, calling him on. That was crazy, he knew, but it made him feel better.

Soon the fog gave way to a deep green-and-yellow haze as the sun climbed higher somewhere above the trees. Whether because of the spirit people or not, Ben could see farther upstream. The water deepened. They came round a narrow turn, and he barely had time to duck before they plowed into a wall of mangrove limbs. Branches clawed at his arms and shoulders. Then the branches were gone. He looked up, then covered his eyes from the bright sun. The canoe sat in a small lake, maybe fifty yards wide.

Ben sat blinking. The heat soaked in, pushing away his fears. They were through. Behind him, his dad was blinking, too, paddle across his knees, body heaving with every breath. His mom could have been asleep, but her face was splotted with red and her lips were dark, cracked. His dad lay a palm across her forehead.

"Where's the station?"

"Miles yet, Bubba." His dad's face looked splotchy as his mom's. "Tarpon River's still a half-mile that way."

Ben paddled. In moments they were winding down a wide creek. The sun and the glare from the water stabbed at his eyes, but that was OK. They were out of the Tangles. His mom's compass said they were headed due east. He whispered 'thank-you' to the Nunnehi.

The creek widened. After a broad turn the mangroves fell away and the creek flowed into a river wider than they had seen in days. Across the river a camping platform – a chickee – sat close in among the mangroves.

The river's current swung the canoe hard right. The tan creek water swirled with the dark brown river. They lurched back to the left, and Ben heard his dad's paddle splashing faster.

"Kick it, son!" he yelled.

Ben paddled as hard as he could, his arms and shoulders aching. The canoe crept across the current until they were even with the chickee, then beside it.

Ben jumped up to the platform, bow line in hand, and stopped. All he could see was river and more mangroves. His dad lay back in the canoe, eyes closed, chest heaving. His mom's face was still, waxy.

"This is it?" he said.

"Tarpon River chickee, Ben. Silver Bay's five miles that way." His dad pointed upriver.

"But the water's going the wrong way . . . "

"If someone hadn't lost the damn tide chart!" His dad sat up, glanced at the piling next to him. "High water's . . . Hell! The sumbitch just turned! Six hours before it slacks."

"So we can rest?"

"No!" His dad leaned forward and put his hands on his wife's cheeks. "Burning up," he whispered. "Sorry, Beth. Hell of a streak. Snake, night, fog, now tide." He leaned forward, head in his hands.

Ben grabbed at a corner post to steady himself. They were as bad off as ever. No shadow-shapes motioned from the trees or rose from the water. It wasn't his fault. The tide would still be going out even if he hadn't lost the tide chart.

The food bag and a canteen thumped at his feet. "Grab some chow. Stoke up for the home stretch." His dad slapped Ben's leg. "We gonna do this, tide or no."

Ben choked down a few sticks of jerky and a Hershey bar without tasting them. He dropped the bag and canteen beside his dad and climbed back into the canoe, set his mom's compass on his knee. North-northeast.

His hands stung as he pushed off. Blisters from paddling so hard. That made him feel better. The current spun them downriver, but they straightened and forced their way upstream. Pain cut across his shoulders and down his arms. He clenched his teeth and paddled harder. If he hurt, that meant he was doing some good. His dad could fall apart,

but he wouldn't. He didn't need his dad, or the Nunnehi. Neither had brought them to safety yet. Neither had protected his mom in the first place. He could save her himself. All he had to do was paddle.

"Pace yourself, son!"

Ben ignored him. The water cooled his stinging palms. He switched sides to ease the burning in his shoulders. The mangrove thickets crept past. He watched the broad stretch of river in front of him, imagining a finish line at the horizon that he had to pull them past.

"You don't slow down, you'll waste yourself before we get there."

Ben kept paddling. He didn't need anyone. He would get them to the research hut before the tide changed. The canoe lurched forward as his dad paddled in time with him, following Ben's lead. He knew nothing but the splash of his paddle, the rush of water past the bow, the ache in his hands, knees and shoulders. After a while he didn't bother to look past the brown water directly in front of him. Pull, reach and pull again. His arms were heavy. He didn't care.

"Ben. Hey! Ben!" Ben kept paddling. "Ben, grab that snag, you hear?"

A dead trunk, sunbleached, jutted into the river just ahead. Ben lowered his head and pulled two, three, four times. The branch was only a few feet closer. He pulled three more times. The branch hadn't moved. He switched sides and paddled as hard as he could.

The world spun. He pulled again and the canoe jumped forward. Where the dead branch had been was nothing but brown water. The shore was 60, 70 yards away, like they'd crossed the river. A yellow leaf swirled past him, racing ahead in the current. He

spun to his left. The mangroves were so close he could nearly touch them. South-southwest.

"No!"

"We got no juice left, Ben."

Ben grabbed at branches. His dad ruddered them away from shore. "We need to rest for when the tide eases."

"I can do it!"

"Ben! This ain't to make ourselves feel better. Anything not good for your mama, it's crap!"

Ben slumped forward, pressed his chest to his knees, trying to block out everything. His dad had quit. If his mom . . . it was his dad's fault. He had been scared. He made them wait the night before. He made them stop now. They could have been in Silver Bay before the tide changed.

"Ben, if flat-out paddling would help, we'd have been there last night." His dad's voice was soft. "We're beat. For now." Ben covered his ears. This wasn't his dad. He saw the bleached trunk, as clear as if it were still in front of him. Only the harder he reached for it, the farther away it was. He breathed deep, was surprised at a rasping sound in his chest. His face felt wet. He wouldn't let his dad see him like that.

The canoe bumped against something. The chickee. Ben steadied the canoe while his dad lifted his mom onto the platform.

"We gotta get you some shade, Beth."

She looked through him, through Ben. Then her eyes focused. "Hey, Ben. I heard you and the Nunnehi. They were talking to you, anyway." She put her good hand on his knee. "You listen for them. Trust them, even if they don't make sense."

Ben looked away as his dad set her in the shade. She rested in his dad's arms, sipping water from a canteen. Water trickled from the corners of her mouth.

"I'm in good hands," she whispered. "Best people I could have taking care of me." She looked through them again.

Ben walked to the far corner of the platform. He closed the compass, ran his thumbs over its cover, then squeezed it so tight he felt the plastic cutting into his palm. She trusted him. He had failed. He squatted at the edge of the chickee, shivering in the sun, arms tight across his ribs to ease the ache trying to rip them apart.