

The Ballad of Big Joe

Terry Tomalin

When word reached me that Joe was dead, I was saddened but not surprised. There's an old saying that if you live by the sword, you'll die by the sword, and Joe had a reputation for violence that extended far beyond the short stretch of that he called home.

Nobody knows how old he was or how many people he had threatened before a slug from a .44 Magnum entered his skull a few inches behind his right eye and ended his reign of terror. Few mourn his passing, for there's no doubt that Joe was cold-blooded predator, a monster in the eyes of some, a beast who'd kill a man, woman or child without compunction. Yes, Joe was the stuff of nightmares. He struck a primordial nerve that lies dormant in most people until they are faced, sometimes quite suddenly, with the question of survival.

"He had a way of making an impression on people," said Jack Coleman, a man who played a pivotal role in Joe's death. "I had nothing but respect for him. This was home. But he had to go."

I called Coleman after a friend told me that Joe was dead. I wanted to know the details of his demise, not out of morbid curiosity, but in the name of peace. For since our first meeting a near quarter century ago, Joe has more than once invaded my dreams. I hated him for it, yet I know his nocturnal visits had somehow made me tougher, stronger, more like him. Still, I needed closure. It was time to put my demons to bed. So naturally, when I learned that Coleman had kept Joe's head, I had to see it.

"That's him," I said gazing into the lifeless black eyes that had stared me down that warm October afternoon twenty-five years ago. "I'll never forget those teeth."

Back in 1980, my life was much simpler. I had no money, no worries but most importantly, no fear. As a twenty-year-old college student, I still felt indestructible. I didn't think about death: mine or anyone else's. And even though I had played with guns as a boy, even killed for sport, I had never thought about carrying a weapon. Joe changed that.

For it wasn't long after our first encounter that I vowed never to be caught unarmed again. I had considered a handgun, but I knew even the best could jam at any moment. Pistols were also utterly useless when wet, and water was my favorite environment. Guns were also unwieldy and not much good for close-quarter combat. I knew that if I ever found myself face to face with Joe again, chances were I'd be close enough to smell the stench of death on his breath. I'd need a knife, something strong and sharp, so if I stabbed the bastard, I could cut him from belly to throat in one clean stroke.

"You need a Kabar," my friend Kevin Flannagan, a Marine embassy guard, advised. "United States Marine Corps weapon of choice."

The knife, developed for the ugly, hand-to-hand fighting experienced in the Pacific Theater of operations during World War II, had a solid steel shank and weighed more than a pound. With a hammerhead on the butt, the Kabar proved a useful tool around camp. But its designers had also kept practicality in mind, making sure the nine inch blade had a channel so blood would drain freely; or else, after the first thrust, the knife would be caught by the natural suction of a stomach wound, making subsequent strikes impossible.

"Perfect," I told Flannagan, the day he delivered my knife. "This is just what I need."

Heavy, yet well-balanced, the Kabar would at least give me a fighting chance, I thought to myself. I knew the knife would be a friend for life and I treated it thus, oiling the blade and sharpening the factory edge till it cut like a razor. I strapped the leather sheath to my waist and practiced grabbing the knife from a sitting position. When that proved impractical, I experimented with a leg strap, which turned out to be too cumbersome. Finally, in the end, I decided to duct tape the Kabar to the thwart of my canoe, where it would be close, but not constricting. I swore that I would never be vulnerable again.

That first encounter with Joe, alone in the swamp, had left me visibly shaken. I had tried to hide my fear but Sam Prather could see it in my eyes.

"You look like you have just seen a ghost," he said.

Prather, a grizzled old canoe instructor with skin like leather, had warned me that very day not to venture too far ahead of our college class paddling the Hillsborough River. But back then, I thought I knew better. I had been paddling canoes since I was old enough to walk and was only taking his class because I knew it would be an easy "A."

When we had put in at Hillsborough River State Park, Prather let me try a small whitewater kayak that he had bought in North Carolina. "Have you ever paddled one of these before?" he asked.

"Sure," I lied.

The short, stubby craft couldn't have been more than ten feet long. But I was eager to impress a dark-haired girl from Maryland that I had had my eye on since the beginning of the semester.

We started off paddling together, me in my tiny kayak, she in a canoe with her roommate who was even better looking. After a mile or so I pressed on ahead, hoping to show just how fast I could go.

After ten minutes of hard going I could no longer hear the sound of laughter and the clumsy banging of wooden paddles against the gunwales of aluminum canoes. About two miles south of the park, the river narrowed. A few families — their names long forgotten — homesteaded here up until the fifties. By 1980, however, the land had been abandoned, except by the rattlesnakes, wild pigs, and of course, Big Joe.

This was his home and he guarded it till the end. The swamp to the south—a maze of tiny creeks and channels called Seventeen Runs—was where he hunted and killed. Its wilderness and disorienting landscape were perfect cover for a crafty and renegade hunter.

"I remember coming back from a fishing trip one day around sunset," Coleman, now a ranger at Dead River Wilderness Park, later recalled. "I knew I had stayed longer than I should have and was feeling a little apprehensive. Seventeen Runs isn't some place you want to be after dark."

Coleman had just rounded a bend of the river when the wind shifted and he caught the smell of rotting flesh.

"I smelled it long before I saw it," he said. "But there it was, the mangled body of a 200-pound buck staring up at me through the water. I'll never forget those eyes."

The deer probably had been drinking from the river when Big Joe snuck up, grabbed it and snapped its neck like a dry twig.

Big Joe hunted both sides of the river, but on warm afternoons, he preferred the west shore, where he'd bask in the sun at the start of The Runs. From this point he'd have easy access to any thing or body that came or went. It was a perfect point for ambush, as I would soon learn.

The Hillsborough's current isn't unusually strong, except after hurricane season, when rains can turn the normally gentle river into a raging torrent. On this particular day, the water was moving rapidly, and I moved along without much effort, hugging the banks, where the current is the quickest.

Moving swiftly and silently, I scanned the clearing for signs of life, but saw none. Still, I had the feeling that I was not alone. That's when I rounded the bend and came face to face with Big Joe.

Our eyes met for just a second and neither one of us moved. But the current continued to carry me forward past him into a downed tree. I swerved to avoid it, nearly tipping the kayak. When I glanced back over my shoulder, he was gone.

I pressed on and soon found myself helplessly lost in the confusing labyrinth of Seventeen Runs. For the most part, I just followed the current. But every ten minutes or so I would look back upstream, because I had this gut-wrenching feeling that I was being stalked.

A zebra on the plains of Africa knows when a lion is near. He might not see it, he might not hear it, he might not smell it, yet he knows it is there, because he can feel it. It's an age-old game played by predator and prey each one knows and accepts its role. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach that despite my high status on the food chain, I had suddenly gone from hunter to hunted.

After two hours of fretful paddling, the river finally opened up and I again found myself in open water. Later at the landing near Morris Bridge, I told Sam Prather what had happened. He laughed and gave me a reassuring pat on the back. He said that he knew all about Big Joe.



I returned to the river the following year, this time with roommate Brian French, and better prepared.

"What's that for?" he asked as I duct-taped the Kabar to the canoe thwart in front of the stern seat.

"Just in case," I said.

"In case of what?" he asked.

"You'll see," I said.

Our canoe was loaded down with gear. We had planned to paddle into the wilderness area below the state park, find some high ground where we could make camp, then kick back with some Jack Daniels and cheap cigars.

As we approached the old homestead, the river's stillness was shattered by squeals, a rebel yell and an engine's roar.

"Look at that," I said to French, pointing to two teenagers on an ATV chasing a 100-pound wild pig.

We laughed and watched the circus on shore, not paying much attention to the river ahead or the shoreline a few yards to my right.

"Jesus Christ," French abruptly screamed. I turned just in time to see Big Joe jump off the bank and land a few feet from our canoe. The impact rocked our boat and nearly tipped it over.

"Holy shit!" French yelled. "Did you see that?"

That is when I told him about my first encounter with the Sentinel of Seventeen Runs.

"It was this time last year except he was hiding on the other bank," I said. "Scared the hell out of me."

Later that night, sitting around our campfire, we joked about the close

encounter. Our minds clouded by whiskey, we talked about what we would do if Big Joe returned.

"That is why I have this knife," I explained.

About three o'clock in the morning, I was awakened from my drunken slumber by screams of panic. I thought Joe had returned and dragged my friend from the tent. I grabbed a flashlight and stumbled outside only to find the very same tormented pig rampaging through our camp.

"Save the bottle," I hollered. But it was too late. It had spilled and the pig was lapping up what was left.

Days later, at a campus pub, French and I recounted the story to a mutual friend, Rich Berube. A veteran backpacker and a buddy since high school, Berube had a spirit for adventure.

Later that night, Berube and I broke out an old Texaco road map and looked for a place further upstream where we could launch our fifteen foot Grumman canoe.

We put in an hour before dawn near State Road 39 and paddled for several miles in the darkness. At sunrise, we heard the familiar sound of wild hog and turned to see several small feral pigs scampering along the riverbank.

Then, less than fifteen feet away, a 110-pound cat vaulted through the clearing and took two swipes at a screaming piglet, which sped off just out of reach.

"Was that what I think it was?" Berube asked.

"I think so," I replied.

The animal looked like a cat, moved like a cat and sounded like a cat. But growing up in New Jersey, I had only seen cats one tenth that size.

"Do you think it was a panther?" I asked.

"I don't know," Berube said. "There aren't supposed to be panthers up this far."

But the Hillsborough River starts in the Green Swamp, which is large enough to support an apex predator such as a panther. Years later, local park rangers (including Jack Coleman) would spot the big cat several times in the same area. However, we were young, inexperienced, and of questionable sobriety. Eight hours later, we were still talking about the cat sighting when we reached the stretch of river that Big Joe called his own.

Shortly before dark we found ourselves at the old homestead and debated about whether it would make a good campsite. We stood on the bank for a few minutes, sipped a beer and laughed about the morning.

Then I spotted Joe watching intently from the other side of the river.

"Let's move on," I said to Berube, pointing out our host. Berube took one look at Big Joe and agreed.

Several years would go by before I would visit the river again. On April 29, 1983, the day before I took my last final exam at the University of South Florida, I took what I thought could be my last trip down the Hillsborough River. I was twenty-two, about to get married and head to Europe where I hoped to find adventure.

My cousin and old fishing partner, Anthony Cavalloro, had come down from New Jersey to stand as my best man. But the day before my big day, we bought a couple of dozen shiners and headed downstream in search of bass. We fished all morning and caught nothing but gar that fought hard but let go as soon as they got near the boat.

At noon, we stopped at the site of the old cracker homestead and ate lunch. I tried to impress my cousin with my knife-throwing prowess, burying the blade of the Kabar in the trunk of a tree on the first try.

"Bet you can't do that again," he said.

I knew he was right, but I tried again and again and each time I failed. The last time the handle hit the tree and the Kabar bounced off and nearly landed in the river.

As I reached down to pick it up, I noticed a deep depression in the sand as if somebody had used the spot to launch a canoe, laden down with gear. At the time, I thought nothing of it. But a few minutes later, as I drifted downstream, I realized what large object had left such a trail.

"Watch out!" Cavalloro warned as we came around a blind curve and surprised Big Joe. I don't think he was out to get us; we just startled him. But the end result was the same. When the 650-pound reptile hit the water, he nearly dumped us in the river.

"My God!" Cavalloro said. "The big difference between New Jersey and Florida is back home you don't have to worry about getting eaten by alligators."

I wound up leaving Florida shortly thereafter, but returned six months later to take a newspaper job in the middle of the state. I didn't get out on the water as much as I would have liked to. But I kept busy reading about natural history and soon developed a morbid fascination with large alligators and the people they killed.

In August, 1984, an eleven-year-old boy was killed while swimming in a canal in St. Lucie County by a twelve-foot, four-inch bull gator described as "aged and in poor health."

Three years later, a twenty-nine-year-old snorkeler on the Wakulla River was killed by a ten-foot, seven inch male.

I was living in Pinellas County when I ran into Rick Norcross, an old friend from my college days. Norcross, a Vermont native who plays both kinds of music — country and western — had landed a gig at the Florida State Fair.

We met one warm winter's day and headed down the Hillsborough in my trusty canoe. I was telling Norcross about Big Joe as we neared the mouth of Seventeen Runs. We were about a hundred yards north of Big Joe's den when I spotted a large object moving down the center of the river.

"Be quiet," I told Norcross. "I'm going to see if I can sneak up on this gator."

Careful not to make any noise with the paddle, I got within a few feet of the beast, when I couldn't help but giggle. Big Joe heard me and turned around in the blink of an eye, his tail slapping the side of the canoe.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Norcross yelled. "Hold on."

Big Joe surfaced about twenty feet away and glared. Our eyes met again like that first time we saw each other.

"Got you good this time," I said. Big Joe submerged and disappeared.

I left again that following summer, this time for New Zealand and Australia, land of the saltwater crocodile. The lessons I learned from Big Joe served me well down under. During my time in the bush, I had read several accounts of locals and tourists who had been killed by the much-feared "salties."

The gruesome stories were told again and again in pubs throughout the Outback. But I quickly found I could hold my own recounting my own strange saga of the big bull gator that they called Big Joe.

A year later, I returned to the U.S. and resumed my old newspaper job. I hadn't thought much about the old gator until the summer of 1993, when my little brother O'Brian came to visit and begged to hit the river.

We had spent plenty of time in canoes together when we were younger, but now he was of legal age, and I looked forward to kicking back in the swamp and drinking a few beers with him.

I planned to stop somewhere in Seventeen Runs. As I approached the narrowest point of the river, I heard a muffled splash. My brother had his back turned to the bow and was getting a beer out of the cooler when I saw a large object rise out of the water a few feet ahead of the canoe.

It took a second for the image to register in my brain: I could see his eyes, but the head looked abnormally large. Then I realized that the gator had assumed the attack stance, a posture I had never witnessed before.

"Jesus Christ," I said, paddling backward.

My brother glanced over his shoulder. "It's just an alligator," he said, popping a beer.

I knew better. That was no ordinary gator. That was Big Joe.

I went home that night and couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about what I would say to my mother if I had lost my brother? I vowed to take more care in the future and never return to that stretch of the Hillsborough River.



A few months later, Big Joe ate Jack Coleman's dog.

"There was an old woman fishing with a cane pole sitting right next to him," he said. "She was pretty shaken up by the whole thing."

Not long thereafter, Coleman was standing on the bridge that spans a slough they call the Dead River.

"I was watching a raccoon feeding along the bank," he recalled. "It was pretty nervous. I think he knew something was up. Then that gator came up from underneath and took him. That raccoon just disappeared. The gator didn't so much as make a ripple in the water."

The Boy Scouts had a campout at Dead River a few weeks later. A few of the boys were playing near the shoreline, and Coleman watched as Big Joe crossed the river, to get closer to the potential prey.

"That was it," he said. "Kids are on his menu right there with dogs and raccoons."

Coleman called the Florida Fish and Game Commission, which in turn notified a licensed alligator trapper named Mike Fagan. Fagan, although just twenty-two, was a seasoned veteran.

"At that point I had been working with my father for fifteen years," Fagan said.

Coleman met with Fagan and the two men agreed that Big Joe had to go. So in October of 1993, Fagan brought out cow lung and secured it to a treble hook that was tied to a piece of re-bar pounded into the river bank.

"He watched the bait for three days," Coleman said. "He just sat there and stared at it."

Fagan said the big male was about thirty-five to forty-five years old and pretty smart to have lived that long.

On the fourth day, Big Joe finally took the bait. Fagan and his father, Milke, returned and dragged the gator out of the water, but not before Joe had bent the re-bar into a horseshoe.

The trappers tried to weigh Big Joe but the scale wasn't big enough. "It stopped at 650 pounds," Coleman recalled.

Fagan saved the hide, which was "validated" on October 13, and gave Coleman ten pounds of the 130 pounds of meat stripped off the twelve-foot, four-inch alligator.

Coleman got to keep Big Joe's head. Inside the jaw is written the year, 93, and the permit number, 7233.

RIVERS OF THE GREEN SWAMP

"We remove about 7,000 nuisance alligators every year," said Lt. Gary Morse, spokesman for the new Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "The problem is that people feed them and they lose their fear of humans."

Nobody knows for sure how many alligators live in Florida's lakes and rivers, but by best estimates, the number lies somewhere between one and two million.

When Fagan pulled Big Joe out of the Hillsborough, he told Coleman that it wouldn't be long before an eight-footer claimed his old den.

Sure enough, a week hadn't gone by before another male took over Joe's old territory.

On a recent trip to the old homestead, now called Dead River Wilderness Park, I stood on the bank where I had stood so many times before and looked across the river at the new kid in town.

I think I'll call him Little Joe.