

MATTHEW R. KAY PUBLISHING HOUSE

A misty, atmospheric photograph of a forest stream. In the center, a child's silhouette stands on a log or bank, looking towards the water. The water is a vibrant, glowing blue-green color, reflecting the surrounding trees and mist. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

NOR  
ANY DROP  
TO DRINK

MATIAS BARRETO

The blue-tinted fluorescent ceiling lights beamed rays of light down into the cafeteria below, grimy and greasy. A table of teenagers was discussing the latest homework assignment given to them by Mr. Hudson, a geometry teacher with an apparent thirst for sadistically torturing students with needless pages of trigonometry practice. One of the students was a short and stocky boy with curly blonde hair, who was perched on the edge of a seat, eagerly taking in his peers' words. On his back was strapped a battered aquamarine backpack, bearing the words *Clifford S.* embroidered in a shimmery green. Soon, the school day came to an end, and students filed out into the courtyard, going their separate ways.

Clifford stepped out into the cool air, waved goodbye to his friends, and started his walk down to the local bus station. He began to feel himself growing parched, the intense dry feeling of emptiness throbbing in his mouth, so he stopped and grabbed his water bottle out of his backpack. There was not a lot of water in it, to begin with, and after he took a swig of it, there was almost nothing left. The water bottle was see-through and made of glass. Small and almost shaped like a square, in large emboldened text, it stated, *Shipment #1802*, and bore the Great Seal of the United States. The ever-familiar eagle holding the winding parchment in its beak simply read, *E Pluribus Unum*. The logo was a little bit annoying, but he liked how it looked and supported the cause. He jammed the bottle back into the bag and ran wildly down the street when he caught glimpse of his bus, blue and gray, pulling into the station.

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Clifford's house was a small thing on a hill, surrounded by other houses of similar sizes. There was a river that ran through the land, but of course, it was murky and full of disease. What water wasn't? The exterior was battered and dirty and some of the windows had wooden boards fixed onto them. He walked up to the door, like he always did, and knocked loudly.

“Do *not* open that door...” came a gruff man’s voice.

Clifford paused, caught off guard, because the only full-grown man who lived there was his father, and this was most definitely not his father. The door slowly creaked open, and a tall man dressed in all-black clothes was standing there. He had a silver badge, which proudly boasted, *US Water Payment Officer*. He had a belt on which a gun hung in a holster.

“Clifford,” breathed his mother, who was standing in the corner of the house, looking small and afraid. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

His father emerged from the other room, pacing. “Martha, is there no chance they’ll hire you sooner? We need this money.”

“Well, you’ve been issued six warnings already, sir. I’m afraid you’re going to be cut off. It doesn’t matter how soon you can make up the money now, it’s too late,” the man said gravely.

Clifford stepped back, now growing concerned.

“Please, no,” cried his mother, breaking into a sob, “we have three children, please... it’d be cruel to do this. I know you’re better than this, please don’t let them make you...”

“Martha,” said his father, who Clifford noticed was starting to look pale.

“Miss, there ain’t nothing I can do about it now, so I ask you to stop crying and pay up soon. Otherwise, your kids here will be dying of dehydration, and well, it ain’t my fault. Thank you for your time, and goodbye.” The officer turned and headed for the door.

“*No!*” screamed his mother. She leaped out of the corner and started to punch the officer in the face repeatedly, yelling and crying all the while, pleading that he did not cut them off.

“Mom!” cried Clifford, who had stepped away from the door, staying well out of the officer’s way.

“Is there any water in this house I should know about?”

“You let us drink! You will not take our water!” she yelled. She immediately got kicked back by the officer, falling to the floor. The officer drew his gun from his holster and then aimed it right at her face.

“Oh my god,” whimpered his father. And then, the man dressed in black with the shiny badge, seizing what they needed to survive, pulled the trigger, ending the life of Clifford’s mother of sixteen years with a shot to the face. His siblings burst out of their shared room, startled and shaken, and began to scream uncontrollably when they saw their mother lying on the carpet, a large, sunken hole square in her face, oozing blood. Clifford and his father were screaming and sobbing too and calling the officer many choice words.

“My babies,” she rasped, “don’t let them take the water, it’s not theirs... to... take... dear god, I’m so sorry...”

“Martha,” blubbered his dad, falling to her side.

“I love you...” she said, shaking. And then, she moved no longer.

“I am sorry it had to come to this, but sometimes measures this extreme are... necessary, for the safety of our noble country,” the government official stated simply.

“You are inhuman,” Clifford shot. “You deserve to die just like she did. Look what you’ve done. *LOOK WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO MY MOTHER! ALL BECAUSE OF WATER?*”

“Why?” Clifford’s little sister cried quietly, “why’d you kill Momma?”

The officer nodded and then slammed the door in their faces.

“You *will* pay for it,” Clifford’s father yelled.

He could hear the officer turning around and opening the door once more. “You’re all under arrest.”

In jail, it seemed like all hope had been extracted from the souls of all the prisoners. Clifford and his father were escorted to a communal cell, and their siblings were taken elsewhere — they were too young.

“Elsie, Charlie,” Clifford’s dad said quickly, “I love you both, I’ll see you all soon, okay?”

“What did a little kid and his daddy do to get here?” laughed a large, bald man, who had a tattoo of a water droplet on his forehead.

“Nothing, we— they took our water, and we didn’t like that, and so... now we’re here,” Clifford muttered.

“Oh, they took your water? Shame,” he chuckled.

Clifford’s father pulled him away from the man. “Let’s go over there and stay out of people’s hair, Clifford.”

“Ah, that’s quite alright. I don’t even have hair. See, son, you see this tattoo on my here head?” Clifford leaned in. The man began to whisper. “You want water? I... know where to get free water. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, that’s why I’m here. I’m sentenced to death, in a week. But you’re only here for a little, I assume — I hope, because... what’s your name?”

“Clifford— Clifford Stinton, I—”

“Clifford. Finish what I’ve started.” He looked around and took Clifford to the corner. “Dion’s Hill? You know it? A big spruce tree on it — tallest there is — look there. I found out about it and I got taken away, taken to here... tread carefully, got it? Take some for your family, an’ take care... and...”

“Clifford!” his dad barked. “Stay away from other people. Stand by me. I don’t trust any of them.”

“Clifford? Our government doesn’t know about this. They arrested me because they found me with water I shouldn’t have had... they’re going to be looking for the source. Don’t get caught, okay?” Clifford nodded, his eyes welling up with tears.

“Clifford!” said his father, now gripping him by the shoulders and dragging him back to the other end of the cell. “I know those types. Always up to no good. Stay away, will you? Stay with me. For Momma, please.”

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After two days in jail, Clifford and his father had gotten released. He knew where Dion’s Hill was, of course — a large hill in a deciduous forest, a day’s trip from his town.

He made up something about a field trip on the following Monday to Dion’s Hill and told his dad he’d be back (with his class, of course), and boarded a train that would take him to the edge of the forest. He walked for hours until he reached the summit of the hill itself, and then got to looking. The tallest spruce tree he could find was far from the hill, in undisturbed land. It didn’t look too out of the ordinary, but he realized something had to be. He climbed up its branches tentatively, looking around, beginning to doubt the stranger’s words. But then he saw the water. He heard it first, the rippling of the crystal-clear water, the tantalizing, gorgeous water... a pool of which was hidden between trees. You’d have to be really looking to see it, and you’d need a great vantage point... like the spruce.

Clifford scrambled down, his heart beating wildly, his mouth aching with thirst, his mind forming an idea... an idea to get back at the government, the very one his mother had died in the hands of. He cupped his hands and plunged them into the pool. It was deep, and the water was cool and crisp. Something like this would absolutely be enough for a whole village. Maybe even

for the world. Quickly, he took note of the location on his smartphone and then returned home, a bottle of water filled. He was going to fill more, very soon.

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Clifford returned to the secret pool with his father and siblings the next day, with dozens of containers, as many as he could gather. Together, until they all filled, they plunged and filled and got wet and played in the water and the shade and drank and laughed.

“Clifford... you’ve done something very extraordinary. You’ve made me the proudest man in the world. And I know Momma’s pleased,” his father told him, wiping tears from his eyes. The tears dripped into the pool as he spoke. “Guys, I think we’ve filled them all.” He took a big drink from one of the bottles. “Let’s get back home, and give some water.”

“This is water... for free?” Elsie, the smallest sibling, asked timidly.

“Yeah,” said Clifford. “You know water used to be free? Before we were born. Before the oceans and rivers and lakes filled with dirt, we could drink those — and the government didn’t sell their manufactured stuff—”

“Can I drink it?” she asked again.

“We should go... it’s getting dark,” their father said, gathering the containers. “Yes, Elsie. This is our water.”

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The plan was simple, in theory. Clifford would go door-to-door, asking people about their situation with water payments, and then come inside and tell them about the water they had. His father would do this too. They would then be instructed to visit the Stinton household later that day and discreetly receive their water. He began doing this on early Tuesday morning, starting with the closest houses.

“Excuse me, uhm, Mrs. Rogers,” he said, clearing his throat, and looking at his elderly neighbor, “could you tell me if you’re able to afford your current government water plan?”

“I’ve been tryin’ to, son. Ever since Frank died I haven’t been getting as much money as I used to. I missed the last payment, and it’s not looking great.” She paused. “Why, Clifford?”

“Mrs. Rogers, please come by our house — the one up on the hill — tonight. I have something to show you.”

And so this continued until they visited almost every house in the area. Later that night, they had all of the containers prepared, and they waited. Clifford was beginning to get worried but then heard a knock at the door.

“Clifford? I’m here now,” said Mrs. Rogers.

“Mrs. Rogers!” said his father, ushering her in. “Do not tell anyone where you got this. If you do, you endanger us and yourself.” He produced a jug full of crisp water from under a table, rippling with movement.

“Clarence, is that... where did it come from? How much do I owe you?” stammered the old woman, embracing the liquid in her arms.

“It’s free, Mrs. Rogers. It’s free water. My boy Clifford here helped out a lot. I can’t say much else, but... enjoy, and come back sometime for more, I mean— if you need,” he explained.

“Thank you, Clifford,” Mrs. Rogers said softly, “I don’t quite know what to say, but... thank you for the gift, and I... I’m sorry to hear about Heather.”

“It’s okay,” Clifford told her. “She would like this. She never did like how much our water was restricted. Hey, Mrs. Rogers... uh, do you remember a time when natural water was clean?”



“I do. Now only the rich can afford to pay for it... so many people have died, good lord. When I was a little girl, you could drink from outside. But... now... well. We’ll see. Maybe you’ve started something here. Now I really must get going. I saw a line forming outside your front door, by the way. I’d get on that.”

She unscrewed the lid of the jug, smiled, and then took a long swig from it. “For freedom,” she whispered, then left.

People filed in slowly, entering with puzzled looks on their faces, then leaving with tears in their eyes, smiles on their faces, and shirts wet from water dribbling down their chins.

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The next day, Clifford showed up to school as if nothing had happened.

“Why would you need to hide?” his father had asked him when he expressed his fear the night before. “Nobody will find out. Trust me. Our neighbors wouldn’t put you in danger like that.”

Clifford had trusted him, yet there he was, sitting in class when there was an abrupt knock at the door. The whole class looked up, expecting a teacher, but the people who entered were nothing of the sort. In walked two men, outfitted in combat uniforms, with rifles strapped to their backs.

One of them cleared his throat and loudly said, “We don’t mean no trouble, folks. Just hear to collect a Mr. Clifford Stinton. Could one of you point me in the right direction?”

Clifford didn’t dare say a word. “He’s the one in the blue sweater, sir,” spoke up a girl, whose name was Prudence Gibbons. The whole class turned and stared at him.

“Ah... Clifford. Clifford Stinton of 327 Walerton Road, is that right?”

He gulped. “Yes, sir—”

“Empty your pockets!” barked the other man. “Leave your belongings. You’re coming with us.” He did as he was told, producing a pencil and a small bottle of water — one not bearing the seal of the United States.

“Illegal water,” said the first man. “We’re going to find where you got that from.” He faced the class and spoke in a very stern tone. “Did you kids know that your friend here has been distributing water illegally? It’s been almost fifty years since anybody tried that. I can’t even fathom where he got that from... and, just so you all know, if *any* of you are caught with unauthorized water... there will be consequences.”

“Hang on,” a classmate said bravely, “you’re going to kill him because he did the right thing for his family and his community? Because he’s smarter than you and has his own water?”

Clifford tensed up. “Clifford, the faster you cooperate—”

Another classmate, his best friend of six years, stood up slowly. “Sirs— I— with all due respect, please don’t take him— he won’t do it again, he’s sorry. He wanted to save his family, I know him, please...”

“Please don’t take me, please... don’t hurt me too,” Clifford sobbed. The overwhelming primal fear and anger rose in his chest. “Why did you— do this to us? Why can’t we have water—”

“ENOUGH!” yelled one of the men, who grabbed him by the shoulder and walked him to the door. “Thank you for your cooperation, children.” The door slammed behind them. He and the two men walked through the halls, gripping him forcefully as he wept and screamed. A few students ran after them. Those who stayed were shaking and crying, even those that had not cared for him. In every room, people poked their heads out, watching as he was taken. The

school collectively cried and mourned for Clifford, as he was taken, screaming, into a black vehicle.

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Clifford would be murdered. The government tried to keep it a secret, but the whole town knew. They knew the truth, that he had been taken because he tried to free water. But the government didn't like that. The secret water source was never found, though they looked. They looked for years. His family would never volunteer any information. The people of the town still had water from his family, and they used it for years to come. Eventually, the government gave in and reversed the laws on illegal water consumption. That didn't solve the issue of polluted water, of course, but it led to something else. Fifty years later, the Clifford Stinton Act was passed, meaning that government-manufactured water had to be free for the world. And so it was.

The man stopped typing and smiled. That was the final sentence. He saved the document, the final draft of his new book: *Clifford Stinton: The Liberator of Water*.

