

## River Run



Travis felt himself being shaken and heard a voice calling his name. He opened his eyes. The boy was leaning over him.

He was lying on the ground, a low wall on his right, the edge of a canyon on his left, descending into darkness. He touched his head where the pain was and found blood on his fingers.

“Are you okay?” the boy asked.

“I guess I blacked out.”

“You could’ve fallen over.”

He looked and saw he was inches away from the edge. “Yeah.”

“It’s getting late. My mom is making dinner and wants you to stay.”

When he didn’t answer, the boy said, “We should be going. Pretty soon it’ll be hard to see in the dark.”

He grasped the rough, cold stones of the wall with both hands and hauled himself up. The sun had set, leaving a narrow blood-red lip on the horizon. Dots of light were visible in the darkening valley. He swung his feet over the wall and said, “Let’s go.”

The boy led him down the steep trail that twisted its way through a dark, encroaching forest. Then the house abruptly appeared like a fairytale phantom, glowing from within, its windows and front door blazing bright yellow. Francesca, her face beaming, her arms folded across her chest against the chill of the evening, was standing on the porch in a trapezoid of light.

“We were getting a little worried,” she said. “It’s easy to take a tumble up there.”

“He did tumble, Mom,” the boy said.

When he came into the light, she saw the blood on his forehead. “I guess you did. Come in, let’s tend to that.”

She sat him down in the kitchen, cleaned up the wound and said, “It’s a big gash. You might need stitches, but I can close it up with some superglue. That okay.”

“Go for it.”

When she was done, he asked her if she had something to drink. “How about some more of that Love Potion Number 9 beer?”

She laughed. “Coming right up.”

She returned with two bottles “To self-knowledge?” she asked, raising her bottle to toast..

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“Sure, why not?”

“So, tell me,” she said, “Did you enjoy the view?”

“It was a bit more than I bargained for. I’d say religious experience, but without the religion.”

“A kind of revelation, then?”

“More like being on the brink of one.”

“You told me you sometimes thought everything is an illusion.”

He laughed. “I guess I was trying to describe how I sometimes feel. I wasn’t trying to be philosophical. I found out what happened to me when I was kidnapped. Talked to the guy that did it, in fact. I was given a drug, an amnesiac that was powerful enough to wipe out my memories and seriously mess with my head. I’m not really sure there’s much of a chance I can go back to the way I was.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Bad things happen to everybody. This is my bad thing. It couldn’t been worse. I could’ve been killed.”

“So you met the person who did that. Did he say why?”

“Of course—he’d been anxious to tell me. Get back at me, hurt me. Not really because I ever did anything to hurt him, but just because my presence on this earth offended him. You’d have to know him to understand why he would think like that.”

“So, that’s it? He gets away with it? Kidnapping and what he did to you?”

“No, he won’t get away with it. It’s going to cost me, but he’s going to pay a higher price.”

“Why should it cost you anything?”

“I made some mistakes. I became CEO of a Mexican restaurant chain that had ties to a drug cartel. They were laundering the cartel’s dug money. Which happens to be illegal. But no one I knew seemed to think it wasn’t such a big deal. It seemed easier to go along than fight it. I made excuses.” He shrugged.

“You mean the person you used to be made excuses.”

“Nobody cares about that. Certainly the law doesn’t care.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Apparently I have pay my debt to society. Somebody has to pay.”

Her tightened lips was all she gave in response. This was none of her business, but she clearly didn’t like the apparent injustice. “Let’s have some dinner,” she said. “It’s getting late.”

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They moved to an adjacent room and sat down at a table in front of a picture window that had the same view as the porch. Now the mountains were shadowy hulks, a few dots of light twinkled in the valley, and the great dome of the starry sky was dominated by a bitten-off moon.

“Back in San Francisco,” he said, “I used to know someone also named Billy. Sometimes we used to camp out under the stars just like those and talk almost all the way till morning.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Everything. He loved to talk and tell stories. Once he told me a story about a lady bug. Would you like to hear it?”

Billy nodded and Travis told the story. At the end, Billy laughed.

“He saw things very differently from other people,” Travis said. The world was like a storybook, full of magic—both good and bad, a place where you might run into a beautiful fairy as easily as a scary dragon.”

“I’d like to meet him,” Billy said.

“He went away. Traveled to a far-off country to find the town where he was born and had lived as a child. He’d been very happy there.”

“Did he find that town?”

“He did. I hear from him every once in a while.”

“I’d like to go to there, too. Maybe I could meet him and he could tell me his stories.”

Francesca, head tilted down, eyes peering up, was giving him a skeptical look.

“Sure, maybe someday. You have to grow up a bit first.”

“Yeah, that’s what everybody says. Mom, I’m finished. Can I go to my room now?”

“Sure, sweetie.” When he was gone, she said, “Is all that true?”

“Mostly. It’s hard to convey to a child what a strange and remarkable person Billy was.”

“What really happened to him?”

“A dragon.”

“Ah.”

“Now he lives up here,” he said, pointing to his head.

“So, do you think Billy was right? The world is like a storybook?”

“Very much so. There’s plenty of magic, we just don’t want to see it. Or we look for it in all the wrong places. At least it seems that

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way to me with my messed up head. You know, I've been thinking about what you said about the choice between the past and the present."

"And?"

"Maybe you're right. Wanting something so bad didn't always mean it was the right thing to do."

"Sometimes, you still have to do it, though. It's a question of what it takes for you to learn something important about yourself."

"I think I have. At least for the self sitting here talking to you. I can't speak for that other guy."

She pressed him further: but was it enough? He said it was never going to be enough, but it would do.

Those tightened lips again.

"Listen," he said. "it's getting late. I need to make a phone call."

"Sure, no problem."

"I don't have my phone on me, must have left it in the car."

"Go ahead. I'm going to clear the table."

It had gotten considerably cooler outside: no wind, unsettlingly still. There wasn't much he could see beyond the porch—just a dark wall of trees, and above that, the dome of a night sky with its ivory-colored moon, nearly full but for a bite on its crown.

He retrieved the phone from the front seat of the car and discovered several voice mails from Candy Sweet. *Definitely don't want to do that.*

But he did want to call Justine.

"Hi, it's me."

"Darren?"

"Yes."

"Hi, where are you?"

"River Run, Vermont. Arrived earlier today, leaving tomorrow morning for Burlington and a flight to Houston. Important matters to take care of there. How are you?"

"Fine. Leaving Marfa tomorrow. Ethan is on the mend. I think he can manage on his own. I've decided not to fly. Instead, rent a car and slowly wend my way back, take in the sites, the national parks, explore the west. So much to see. I feel like an adventure. Spend some time getting reacquainted with myself."

"I envy you. I've got my own little adventure coming up."

"How's that looking?"

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“My lawyer’s been meeting with the prosecutors. She thinks I might be able to avoid serious jail time. It’s a question of how cooperative I can be. I’ll do my best. We’ll see.”

“So this is it. Are you disappointed?”

“I am who I am. Time to turn the page. How many people get the chance for a do-over? Begin a new story? I’m fine. Time for a break, anyway. I’ll be leaving Houston. I have no interest in hanging around there. Maybe head west, like you.”

“Stop in and say hello.”

“I’d like that.”

He looked up and, through the window, could see Francesca busy in the kitchen, washing dishes, putting things away. She turned her head in his direction, showing an impishly smiling face. He waved, and she quickly glanced away, as if ironically embarrassed at having been caught spying.

“I need to go,” he said. “It’s late. We’ll talk later.”

When he returned to the house, Francesca said, “I know you have to go, but if you’d like to stay the night and get a fresh start tomorrow, that would be fine.”

“I appreciate that.”



Between sleep and waking, he’s aware of the rustling of the bedclothes, the dull crunching of the mattress springs. He looks but sees nothing. With the moon having set, the room is blindingly, unnaturally dark.

He feels her next to him, her breath in his ear, her lips on his neck and cheek. A surge of emotion, and the realization of their intentions intersecting at this moment and in this place. As if in a dream, as if bodiless, as if floating in space, free of gravity and constraint, the vast starscape above, the earthscape all blue and white below, in a sphere totally defined by touch, where words are unnecessary, if not impossible. From an initial spark, comes a jet of white-hot flame, it’s roar setting the silence and the darkness on fire, building in intensity, rising up, an engulfing auto-de-fe of yellow and red—like being swallowed by the sun—until finally, sadly, consumed, spent and emptied, they lie together, entwined, in the ashes of desire.

With the sun in the west rising above the glittering mouth of the

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bay, they're in the car heading north, across the great bridge, its blood-orange towers looming under an azure sky.

"Where should we go?" she asks.

"It's up to you," he says, "you're driving."

# ON THE ROAD



## On the Road

“I’M EN ROUTE TO SANTA ROSA, passing through Sacramento and San Francisco. Will that work for ya?”

“Yes, it would.”

“Okay, then. Climb aboard.”

Inside the cab of the semi, the driver offers his hand. “I’m Kurt.”

“I’m sure I have a name,” you tell him, “but I just don’t happen to know it at the moment.”

“Right.”

He is dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, his light hair cut longish just over the ears and thinning above his forehead. On his feet are black athletic shoes. Once he has the truck on the interstate and eases it up to speed, he says, “Things are gonna be pretty rough for you. No money, no name, this crazy story that a lot of people are not gonna believe. Being a woman makes it even crazier. You need a plan.”

“Any ideas?”

He tells you he has a laptop stowed behind her seat. “I’ve got Internet service,” he says. “Why don’t you do a search. Ask Mr. Google. He knows everything.”

You do as he says and look up *amnesia* in Wikipedia. The information is skimpy but you read out a section that says the type of amnesia that you appear to have, called “dissociative fugue,” is typically caused by a head injury which can be permanent. There are psychiatric causes but these usually resolve over time, but while popular in fiction, this type of amnesia is extremely rare.

“Well, okay,” he says. “You’re not a fictional character, so it looks like you just have to wait it out.”



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You continue searching but find nothing else. When you exit out of the web browser, you notice that most of the folders on the desktop have titles like Current Drafts, Story Ideas, Archive Stories, Novel in Progress, Poems.

“I couldn’t help noticing,” you say, mentioning the folders that seem to indicate that he is a writer.

“It’s a nasty habit. I can’t seem to kick it.”

“People say it’s good therapy.”

“What do they know?”

“It’s not?”

“It’s something you do because you can.”

“Have you been published?”

“Not really. Not anything that counts.”

“What are you working on now?”

“It’s novel about finding yourself—my favorite topic since it applies to me. I figure if I keep writing about it, I’ll eventually get there. I’m closing in on the last chapter. Still not sure which way it’ll go. Couple of possibilities. Always the hardest part for me. So the question is: go with your gut, with what seems right, or what readers would want to read.”

“So what is it that what readers want—a happy ending?”

“Not necessarily. People like to see that everything you’ve put your main character through was worth it.”

“Why is that, do you think?”

“Because in life that’s not how it generally works out. “Lives of quiet desperation. Who was it said that?”

“I have no idea.”

The truck swings around a sharp bend in the highway, opening a new vista. She nods toward the windshield, “This is really pretty country. I love coming through here.” The terrain has become mountainous—high scrub meadows dotted with pines, the distant contours of the Sierras against a late-afternoon sky the color of wilted roses.

You stare at the road ahead, seeing how it winds this way and that through the mountains.

“Anything coming back yet?” Kurt asks.

“No,” you say, but even if it hasn’t, even if it never will—that’s okay. Just one of life’s tricky surprises. Bad things happen to everybody. This is just yours. Why should you care how it turns out?

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Deal with it. Work at it. Move ahead. Show what you're made of. It's a whole new book, not just another chapter. In the end, it doesn't matter. The end has already been determined. The loss is built in. It's what you do along the way that counts.

"Okay," Kurt says. "Up ahead here we got a little place I sometimes stop at for dinner. What do you think? Hungry? It's a Mexican joint. Nothing to write home about. But not that bad, either. That okay?"

"Actually, I don't eat Mexican, it upsets my stomach. Is there something else close by?"