

## River Run



Travis felt himself being shaken and heard a voice calling his name. He was on his back, cold, his head hurting. He opened his eyes. A boy was leaning over him.

He was lying on the ground, a low wall on his right, the dangerously-close 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 was confused, but sensible enough to trust the boy’s intentions. Grasping the rough, cold stones of the wall with both hands, he 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 asked the boy, “Where the hell am I?”

“On the mountain.”

“What mountain?”

“It’s Mount Etta.”

“Where’s that?”

“In River Run.”

“What state is that?”

“Vermont.”

“I’m in Vermont?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You said your mom wants me to stay for dinner?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

The boy led him down the steep trail that twisted its way through a dark, encroaching forest. Then a house abruptly appeared like a fairytale phantom, glowing from within, its windows and front door blazing bright yellow. A woman on the porch was standing in a

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trapezoid of light, her face beaming, her arms folded across her chest against the chill.

“We were getting a little worried,” she said when they reached the house. “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.”

“Do you know me?” he asked.

“As much as anyone can after an hour’s conversation. Are you okay?”

“I blacked out when I fell. I don’t remember being here.”

“What do you remember?”

He said he remembered being confronted in a parking garage by two men with guns, one of whom was a friend, the second a stranger. They had tied his hands and put him in the back of a van. Sometime later, the man who was his friend gave him an injection while the other man held him down.

“You were kidnapped?”

“That’s right.”

“Where was that?”

“In Nevada. I was there for a convention. You need to call the police. I’m sure they’re looking for me.”

“Not anymore.”

He didn’t understand what she was saying. What was she talking about?

“That was over three years ago,” she said.

She told him she would tell him everything she knew, but first she would take care of the cut on his head to stop the blood from running down his cheek. She thought he probably needed to have the wound stitched up.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ve got bigger problems.”

“I’ve got some superglue. That should close the wound.”

“Okay.”

The glue appeared to work. When she was done, he asked her if she had something to drink.

“Would a beer do?”

“Actually whisky would do.”

“I’ve got some bourbon.”

He nodded yes.

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She poured the drink and watched as he drank most of it. “You came here around four this afternoon,” she said. “That’s your car out front. You were in the area looking for relatives. After the kidnapping, you lost your memory and your identity, and spent three years in San Francisco until you were finally recognized and returned to Houston. You’ve been on a hunt for your past ever since.”

“Jesus.”

“You don’t remember any of that?”

He finished off his drink and shook his head.

“Let’s have some dinner,” she said. “It’s already cooked and the table is set.”

They moved to an adjacent room and sat down. “Earlier you told me that this house was where your parents lived after they were married,” she said. “Shortly before coming here, someone gave you your mother’s journal. You probably have it in your car.”

“I never knew my parents,” Travis said. “They died when I was a baby. I was raised by foster parents—not a time I remember with much fondness.”

“You were hoping to recover your memories. Looks like you have.”

“Yeah, but not all. I seem to be missing almost four years.”

“You told me you spent most of your time in San Francisco, which is where you ended up—you had to live on the streets.”

“No loss there. Last thing I need are memories of bad times—had plenty of those growing up.”

“You were very worried about something—didn’t say what—something you were in the process of learning about yourself.”

“Yeah. I think I know. Just a question of time. But when the money’s terrific and you think you’re smart enough to have all the contingencies covered, you tend not to worry about it. Basically, I got involved in shit.”

“Having to do with your business?”

“More or less. The kind of shit they put people in jail for.”

“Have anything to do with the kidnapping?”

“Not as far as I know. Guy I knew from way back, needed a lot of money and thought kidnapping me was an easy way to get it. Do you know if they got away with it?”

When she told him they had, his face tightened, his jaw clenched.

“You told me it was the drug they gave you that caused you to

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lose your memory.”

“Right. I guess I should be pleased it wasn’t what usually happens—a bullet in the back of the head. And that’s if they like you.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Finish this very nice dinner, make a phone call and see where things stand. I’ll figure something out. I always have. Money creates problems, it also solves them Who knows? If one thing doesn’t work, something else might. You try and keep on trying. Doesn’t pay to ask questions or worry about what’s right or wrong. That’s the way it is. It’s a game. No rules, no holds barred, no way out. You stay in. You keep on playing.”

“So what’s the point?”

For the first time, he smiled. “That’s the beauty of it. There is no point. The only people who think otherwise are the suckers of the world. And God bless them—there are so fucking many.”

The boy cast a puzzled look at his mother and said, “Mom?”

“We don’t use those words here,” she told Travis.

“Yeah, me and my potty mouth, sorry.” Then he turned to the boy and said, “Kid, don’t grow up like me. I’m a bad example.”

“What happened to you?”

“Got off on the wrong foot,” he said and winked at Francesca.

“I mean, since when you first came here?”

“I went up that mountain. Guess that wasn’t such a good idea, was it?”

The boy shook his head, then, having finished eating, rose from the table and said he was going up to his room.

“That’s a wonderful son you have,” Travis said.

“He’s a boy. He has his moments.”

“You know, I assume you introduced yourself, but that was for the other guy, so I don’t know your name.”

“Francesca.”

“Beautiful name, beautiful woman.”

“Thank you.”

“I need to make that call,” he said, getting up from the table. “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

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wall of trees. The sky was mostly clear and full of stars, a few stray clouds wafted across an bone-colored moon, nearly full but for a bite on its crown.

He retrieved the phone from the front seat of the car and was surprised to find it different from the brand he always preferred. Still, it took him less than a minute to discover several voice mails from Candy Sweet. She had been calling him from her personal cell phone. He returned to the porch and checked the time. It was getting late. Would she still be up? Didn't matter. This was important. He punched her contact listing. It rang twice, and then she picked up.

### **Official Transcript**

#### **Telephone Surveillance**

**FBI document DM45-70245**

**Call Participants: Candace Sweet, Travis Quinn**

CS: Travis, where the hell are you?

TQ: In Vermont.

CS: What are you doing there?

TQ: I don't know.

CS: How can you not know?

TQ: It's complicated.

CS: You need to get your ass back here, Travis. The FBI came in and cleaned us out. Carted away file cabinets and computers. Took a bunch of people in custody, including Tony, and they keep asking if we know where they could find you. They want to talk to you, Travis, and they're pissed about not being able to. Your lawyer has also been calling and asking the same thing. I think you need to get in touch with her.

TQ: Yeah, I see she's been leaving me voice mail and texts.

CS: Why haven't you called her back?

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TQ: Apparently I have.

CS: What does that mean?

TQ: Like I said, it's complicated.

CS: Everybody thinks this is like the last time you disappeared. Especially the police.

TQ: It's not like that. I haven't disappeared. I'm coming back. What about Gordon Cripps?

CS: He's dead, Travis. They found him yesterday. Shot in the head. So far they don't know if he did it himself or he was murdered.

TQ: What about my father-in-law?

CS: Don't know. The y searched your house. I wouldn't be surprised if they're listening in to this phone call.

TQ: You're probably right. Look, I need to take care of some things, but I'll be back as soon as I can. Tomorrow. I promise—fly back from Burlington. I'll send you the flight info.

CS: All right, Travis. Take care. Do the right thing.

TQ: Don't I always?

His next call was to Victoria Skelly, his lawyer, who also told him to return to Houston immediately. The FBI had been monitoring Frijolo on suspicion of partnering with a Mexican drug cartel in laundering illegal drug money. Now they were making their move. She wasn't sure he would be arrested, but thought it likely. She strongly advised him to notify her when and where he would return, so she would be there to handle things if he was subject to arrest.

He sent a one-work text back to her: "Okay."

He looked up from the phone saw through the window Francesca busy in the kitchen, washing dishes, putting things away. She was an attractive woman, something endearing in her face, the way her lips moved, her eyes. What must she be thinking of him? A man with a bizarre story shows up, goes out to take in some highly

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touted scenery and returns as someone else. He recalled the moment when he'd come down the mountain path with her son and approached the porch, how pleased to see him she'd been—something in her expression that hinted at more than a friendly interest. But that expression hadn't been repeated.

As he watched her, he saw her turn her head in his direction, a face empty of expression. He waved, and she quickly glanced away, as if embarrassed at having been caught spying. He went back to the phone and scrolled through his recent texts, finding several to Sylvia Hazard, someone he hadn't seen or spoken to in years. What was that all about? He saw other texts as well—to people he had once been close to. Obvious detective work, he thought, the evidence of a man struggling to discover his past.

Overcoming the sensible option of doing nothing and returning to the house, he touched Sylvia's number. It rang four times before she picked up. By the sound of her voice, he could tell that she had been asleep.

### **Official Transcript**

#### **Telephone Surveillance**

**FBI document DM45-70246**

**Call Participants: Sylvia Hazard, Travis Quinn**

SG: Hello?

TQ: I know it's late, Syl, but I had to call.

[long silence]

SG: Jared?

TQ: Yes.

SG: It's very late.

TQ: I know. I'm sorry. I don't have much time. For once in my life I don't have a good idea of what's going to happen tomorrow. I don't have a plan.

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SG: Are you in trouble?

TQ: Very likely.

SG: I saw it on the news. Your company being investigated.

TQ: Right.

[long silence]

SG: You called me Syl. No one calls me that. No one ever called me that. You were the only one.

TQ: Yes, I know.

SG: I saw you twice in the last two weeks, and you never called me that. So you got your memory back?

TQ: Yes, I did.

SG: That's wonderful. You got what you wanted. I'm happy for you. Finally you can move on.

TQ: How are you doing?

[long silence]

SG: We talked all about that, Jared. We talked about a lot of things. Why are you calling me at one in the morning?

TQ: I don't know why. Maybe see where we stood.

SG: I already told you where we stood.

TQ: I don't remember.

SG: Don't remember that or don't remember anything.

TQ: I don't remember anything since the kidnapping.

SG: Good lord.

TQ: Yeah, it's fucked up. I'm guessing you told me the same thing you'd told me once before—that you'd moved on. That's okay. Really. I understand. You don't need me to fuck up your life. I did everything you warned me not to do. Now it's all come crashing down on top of me.



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SG: Jared, I don't know if it's a good idea to be talking about this.

TQ: Yeah. I know. People listening in.

[long silence]

SQ: It's very late, Jared.

[sobbing]

TQ: I'm sorry.

SG: I know you are, sweetie. I can't do this anymore. I have to go.

TQ: Take care, Syl.

SQ: You, too, Jared.

When he returns to the house, Francesca asks him what his plans are, adding that, given it's so late, he's welcome to stay the night.

"I appreciate that."

"There's a guest room down the hall."

He accepts the fact that her words contain two meanings, although he's impressed that she's willing to make such an offer to an obvious head case. There are a few very nice people in the world, and she is clearly one of them.

"I've already put you to more trouble than I should have," he says. "Is there a motel nearby?"

She says there's one the village.

"I need to get up early and head out to Burlington to catch a plane. A motel makes more sense."

"All right, then."

Clearly she is relieved.

He says goodbye. She wishes him luck and gives him directions. Then it's a short drive down a narrow, winding road to the motel. He goes through the motions of signing in. An elderly man hands him an oversized key of the kind pictured in a children's book of fairytales. The Spartan room smells reassuringly of cedar. Stripping down to his underwear, he drops to the bed without bothering to pull back the covers, and within minutes falls asleep.

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When he wakes, it's because of the loud music. He checks his watch, but it's the same time as it was when he first arrived at the motel. Looking more closely he sees that the second hand is not moving. He thinks: either my watch or time itself has stopped.

He gets up, dresses and leaves his room, following a long corridor toward the sound of the music until he reaches a door at the end.

When he opens it, music pours out in full force. There's a party in progress with tables of hors d'oeuvres, an open bar, decorations, the steady drone of banal conversation, and people he doesn't recognize. It seems like a wedding party, but maybe not. Curious to see what it's all about, he enters what he now realizes is a good-sized ballroom.

The music is suddenly Mexican, being played by extravagantly dressed mariachis in sombreros so large they resemble beach umbrellas. On the crowded dancefloor, he sees his wife Alma dancing with a man in a black tuxedo (perhaps the groom), whose face is in profile and vaguely familiar. It's a slow dance, and she seems excessively, even lewdly, close to her partner. When he passes by, she asks him if he's having a good time. He says he's not because he doesn't understand how he came to be here and, moreover, isn't too happy about the way she throws herself at anything wearing pants.

She smiles and gives him her middle finger.

Sitting at a table nearby is the rest of his family with the exception of Tony. His mother-in-law in her wheelchair is devouring a large piece of wedding cake. Alvaro is busy on his cell phone, and Papi is fast asleep, his head slumped forward, his mouth agape.

Where's Tony? There he is, standing against a far wall deep in conversation with Gordon Cripps and a third man in a black tuxedo, who is perhaps the groom. It's clear they must have seen him, but they make no acknowledgement of it, as if he's invisible, as if he doesn't matter.

The music has now changed. A small band of elderly gentlemen dressed like railroad conductors, is playing a waltz. In the middle of the floor Candy Sweet, wearing a wedding gown so white that it makes him squint, is dancing with her new husband, handsome and proud in a black tuxedo, tails flying. He decides that when the dance is over, he will offer his congratulations to the bride and groom. But

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the dance goes on and on, and growing impatient, he decides he's had enough and will leave. He needs to get some sleep. He's got a long drive ahead of him, and then a long flight after that. But where is the way out? There's a nearby door with guests entering and leaving, perhaps that's it. But when he goes out, he finds himself not back in the motel corridor, but in a smaller room with people solemn and serious-faced standing about and talking in low voices.

It's very quiet, like the meditative silence of a chapel. Then he understands why. At the other end of the room there's an open casket, propped up and tilted forward like a display case, surrounded by wreaths and vases of flowers. He dislikes funerals, and wakes even more, so he isn't about to linger here. But the exit is not behind him, where it logically should be, but near the casket. He heads toward it, passing by the deceased where he hears one of the mourners say to another, "I think I speak for everyone here when I say good riddance." He casts a glance at the casket and notices that the deceased is dressed in a black tux and looks exactly like the man who was dancing with Candy Sweet. He has a sense that the man really isn't dead, and not wanting to be there when he "wakes up," he quickly turns around and leaves the room with the idea of returning to the ballroom, which should have been immediately ahead, but isn't. Did he go out a different door? Should he go back or continue?

But wait. How could he be so stupid? The corridor is in fact the one in the motel, with a series of doors, none of them numbered. They had been before when he first checked in. What had happened to the numbers?

He tries the first door and, finding that his key opens it, he goes in. It's totally dark. As he hunts for the light switch he hears a soft groaning. When he finds the switch and flicks it on, there to the left is a man and woman standing against the wall. The man, has his trousers and underwear bunched around his ankles. The woman's legs are dangling in the air around the man's waist, her arms tightly linked behind the man's neck, her face barely visible just above the man's shoulders in the midst of an obviously intense orgasm. No question who it is. It's Sylvia. Although he's not quite sure, it seems the man is the same one wearing the black tux and lying in a casket. Apparently he wasn't dead after all.

He immediately backs out of the room and closes the door. Perhaps his room is the next one. He tries that door, but the key fails

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to open it. He tries the one aft that, and this time it opens. A gust of very hot, very moist air spills out. He's thinking, I need to call the Management. No numbers on the doors and now this. Something is very wrong. And it very well might have to do with the nearly deafening sound of churning water. Overflowing bathtub, broken pipe? No. He switches on the light and discovers not a motel room but a large swimming pool, crowded on all sides with naked couples making love—so many that they remind him of those baby turtles massed by the thousands on a beach, madly scuttling for the sea before dive-bombing gulls can snatch them for an impromptu lunch. Intrigued, he enters, wondering if there might possibly be an unpaired woman waiting for a partner. And yes, there is one! Following a meandering path through the writhing bodies, he comes to the edge of the pool, where the water is swirling in a circle like a vortex.

Not a good sign.

In fact, looking more closely, he realizes that it's not a swimming pool at all, but a giant toilet.

As he considers what to do next—keep looking for that unpaired female, or get the hell out of there—he hears someone say, “hey,” and looks down.

It's Francesca, the last unpaired female, now decisively paired beneath a man heaving furiously, his body glistening with sweat. She reaches out, grabs hold of his ankle and yanks so hard that he feels himself upended on the slippery porcelain and falls backward into the churning water, which turns out to be much closer than he thought and where the strength of the vortex is so powerful, so relentless, that no matter how hard he struggles to escape its pull, he's unable to keep himself from being sucked under.

And he's not alone. All around him are other men in the same predicament—their flailing limbs, their wild hair, their bulging eyes, their pale, panicked, helpless faces. It's then that he realizes that they all look the same—in fact, they all like the man in the black tuxedo, they all look like just like him. Above him, the surface of the water is rapidly slipping further and further away, while below him at the very bottom is a large black hole—the drain—growing bigger and bigger as he's drawn toward it. No question, that's where the vortex is taking him. A destination, a terminus. Beyond, he knows, is total darkness. The darkness of finality, of nothing, of nothing at all.

# 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 her hand. “I’m Kate.”

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

“Right.”

She is dressed in bib overalls and a sweater, her dark hair cut almost as short as a boy’s. On her feet are beat-up athletic shoes. Once she has the truck on the interstate and eases it up to speed, she 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. You need to have a plan.”

“Any ideas?”

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

You do as she 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,” she says. “You’re not a fictional character, so it looks like you just have to wait it out.”

You continue searching but find nothing else. When you exit out

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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 she 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 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?” Kate asks.

“No,” you say, but even if it hasn’t, even if it never will—that’s okay. Just one of life’s curveballs. Why should you care how it turns out? Deal with it. Work at it. Move ahead. Show what you’re made of. It’s not a new game, just another inning. In the end, it doesn’t

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matter. The end has already been determined. The loss is built in. It's what you do along the way, how you play the game that counts.

"Okay," Kate says. "Up ahead here we got your classic Mexican eatery. What do you think? Hungry? Nothing to write home about. But not that bad, either. It fills you up, and that's what counts. That okay?"

"Fine. You're driving."