

## River Run



He feels himself being shaken and hears a voice calling to him. He opens his eyes and sees the boy leaning over him.

“Are you okay?”

He’s lying on the ground, the low wall on his right, the edge of the canyon on his left, descending into darkness. He touches his head where the pain is and finds blood on his fingers.

“I guess I blacked out.”

“You could’ve fallen over.”

“Maybe I should have.”

“Are you okay now?”

He doesn’t know how to answer.

With the sun hovering just above the horizon, the air has become cooler and he senses that he is perilously close to that thin membrane that separates this world from another more authentic reality.

He turns. On the right, the path continues up, no doubt to the top of the mountain. Is that his future? Up to the very top, and then what? Where do you go from there? On the left the path descends back into the chaotic disaster of the past. Nothing but dead ends. You have gone as far back as you can go. There have been no revelations, no spontaneous return of your memories. You have learned much about your past life, but not enough to make yourself whole again. Nor is it likely that you ever will. You think of all the places you have been and all the people you have talked to. You think of all the choices you have been given and how often you have chosen badly. And you think of your poor mother, delivering her message to you from beyond the grave, not knowing that her very words, and the sad misplaced conviction behind them, is a dagger to your heart. Below your feet is the third option of Scott Luddin’s game. Scott talked about the logic of a character, built-in from the very beginning, as the real explanation for the illusion of choice, and how the engine of cause and effect drives you ever forward until the end arrives and then there it is: the destination that was meant to be yours all along. Just a few anxious seconds away. Why not? A little nudge, a leap, a fall, the air rushing up, the stars waiting above you, the dark beckoning below, the door opening, the page turned, and it’s a whole new beginning.

Looking up, you see the horrified face of the boy rapidly

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diminishing to a dot. You feel the cold air rushing past, and then a final futile ache of regret—then nothing.

# ON THE ROAD



## On the Road

ON YOUR THIRD TRY, YOU FIND a driver who is willing to give you a ride, claiming that she doesn't really buy your story but has a long road ahead and will appreciate your company.

"I'm heading up to Santa Rosa, passing through Sacramento and San Francisco. Will that work for ya?"

"Yes, it would."

"Okay, then. Climb on up."

Inside the cab, she 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."

"You will at some point."

She is dressed in jeans and a green cambric shirt, her short, nearly blonde hair parted in the middle of her head. On her feet are silver-gray athletic shoes with orange lacings. Once she has the truck on the interstate and eases it up to speed, she settles back with a sigh and turns over the driving to the part of her brain that has traveled this route many times before.

Silence and the deep throbbing of the engine. Finally 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."

You do as she says and look up *amnesia* on Wikipedia. The information is skimpy but you read out a section that says the type of amnesia that you appear to have, "dissociative fugue," is typically

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caused by a head injury, that there are psychiatric causes but these usually resolve over time, and that while popular in fiction, this type of amnesia is extremely rare.

“Well, okay,” she says. “You’re not a fictional character, so you don’t qualify.”

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 she is a writer.

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

“People say it’s good therapy.”

“Wouldn’t go that far. Pretty good escape though.”

“From what?”

“Everything.”

“Have you been published?”

“A few lucky hits.”

“What are you working on now?”

“I don’t like talking about it. I’m in the home stretch. It would be like taking the roast out of the oven an hour early. The ending still needs work. Someone once said the ending is just the place where you stop the story. Yeah, easy for him to say.”

An idea occurs to you. “All right, you’re a writer. Say I’m a character in your book, what would you have me do?”

Without thinking, she says, “Go to a hospital, get yourself looked at.”

“And then?”

“If that doesn’t work, you’re going to have learn how to survive on the streets. You can do it—looks like you’ve done it before—the nice clothes you’re wearing, that expensive watch, even your haircut. Just be persistent and patient. At some point you’re gonna be recognized. But that’s just gonna be the beginning of a whole set of new problems.”

“How so?”

“You’re not that person anymore.”

“So, why? Why me?”

“Keep searching and that’s something you’ll eventually find out. If you mean in general, ‘why me?’ that’s just the way it works. Sorry.

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It's a story. Everyone has a story."

"But why *this* story?"

"Strictly speaking from a writer's point of view, because it's inneresting. The idea is to come up with something that will grab a reader, something original, something that readers and other writers will read, and think, 'wow, that's pretty good.'"

"So what I want doesn't count?"

"Right. Unfortunately. But you can come up with your own stories and create your own characters if you want."

"That's no help."

"You'd be surprised how much of a help it can be."

"So what's going to happen to me? Do I get my memories back?"

She laughs. "Truthfully, I don't know. I'm not into happy endings. It's too easy. It's what people expect. It's too simple. Simple is boring. Complexity is what's interesting. Sometimes what you think is a happy ending, turns out not to be. Maybe I'd do that. Or leave it open. Or something else entirely. Really, though, I wish I could do them all, but then what's the point? People want a point. Life is pointless. It's up to fiction to supply one. God can get away with doing them all, but not the likes of us."

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 bloody water.

You stare at the road ahead, seeing how it winds its clever way through the mountains.

"Anything coming back yet?" Kate asks.

"No," you say, but somehow you're less anxious about it, as if you got an unexpected opportunity to make your case to a sympathetic ear, and now all you have to do is see it through, confident that whatever happens, it will be for the best.

"Okay," Kate says. "Up the road here, just outside Sacramento, we got a little place I sometimes stop at for dinner. What do you think? Are you hungry? It's a Mexican joint. Pretty decent food. At least it won't kill ya. That okay?"

"Fine. You're driving."