

## The River and I

Am I an exceedingly brave soul, rushing headlong where angels fear to tread? Or am I simply a coward, who is unable to face life's relentless onslaught of trials and tribulations?

I guess it doesn't really matter anymore, because what's done is done. If nothing else, death's frigid embrace is final.

But damn, what a rush! And I'm not talking about the freefall from the bridge; although, that was definitely a blast. No, I'm referring to guzzling the intoxicating brew of defiance. My little way of finally flipping off whatever deity rules the cosmos. Cutting off traffic, pedal to the metal on the highway to hell.

I don't remember hitting the water. I was probably knocked unconscious by my headfirst impact with the water's dark limpid surface. Or maybe not. Whatever. All I know, is that it feels good here on the riverbank, with the warm sun on my back, watching the murky water roll past.

Was this the mythical Styx?

"How was your journey?" A deep voice inquired.

I don't like to admit it, but I jumped at the sound of the voice. In fact, I damn near pissed my pants, but if you tell anyone, I'll deny I said it. Dead or not, I still have my pride you know.

Anyway, I looked over to my right, and I noticed this old man with flowing white hair and a matching shaggy beard, dressed in a long tattered robe the color of Georgia mud.

Now we're talking! I'm in hell with one of the guys from ZZ Top.

"Uh, okay I guess." I finally replied. "You know what they say, life's a bitch, and then you die."

"Sorry, I haven't heard that one, but I suspect we travel in different circles."

"So, what's your name old man? And when do we cross the river?" I asked.

The old man's deeply seamed and weathered face furrowed, as he appeared to ponder my query.

"I am the river, and my journey is done. From here, I will spread my substance to the sea, and I will lose myself in her warm embrace.

"You mean this isn't the Styx? We're not waiting for the ferry to Hades?"

This time, I just got a blank look, and for some reason the deafening silence seemed especially uncomfortable, so I made an attempt at small talk.

"Okay, I just jumped off a bridge. What's your story?" I asked.

The old man, "Old Man River" according to him, looked up to the cloudless granite sky, and his coffee colored eyes sparkled like the sun itself was reflecting from their depths.

"Mother earth spread her legs, and with an orgasmic quake I was born as a gurgling spring rushing from her womb." He said.

Kinda like me then. "I was conceived with moans of pleasure, and born into this world amidst screams of agony." I stated.

"I fed on deep winter snows, and grew ever stronger as I surged downward from rocky crags and glacier covered peaks. Nothing could stand in my path, such was the power and fury of my youth." He said.

"Yeah, I hear you." I said, with conviction. "When I was younger, I had all the answers. I was immortal, and filled with the omniscience of youth."

“I left the mountains, and my still waters ran deep.” Old Man River continued. Toe to toe, and blow for blow, I answered the challenge.

“I matured, sort of. I finally realized that I couldn’t win every battle. I began to chose my fights more carefully.” I said.

“I became more patient. Over time, the hardest rock, and the most heavily re-enforced embankments gave way to my tenacious efforts.” He said.

Now I protested.

“That’s not fair. You have a lot more time to work with.”

The tired old face broke into a toothy grin. “I think not, although I suppose time is relative. However, did you not attempt to intentionally speed your demise?”

He had me on the ropes, and his expression said he knew it.

“Still waters run deep old man, but also dark. I saw the futility of my existence, and chose to expedite its inevitable end.” I said, and the words of his last statement echoed in my thick skull.

“Then that’s where our paths part, my foolish friend.” He said sagely.

“You would deny the futility of my existence?” I asked, with not a little indignation, making a poor attempt to continue the banter while my addled mind digested his earlier comment.

*Did he say attempt?*

“No more than mine.” He replied.

“But you have purpose. You shape the land, and provide sustenance to its inhabitants.” I argued.

I must have misunderstood him earlier. I probably had water in my ears or something.

“I was born merely to feed the sea. Those that come after will undo my deeds. I gladly welcome my destiny, the plan of my creator. I have run my race, and my task is complete.”

My warm fuzzy feeling was fading fast.

“Your creator? So you think a higher being cares about our existence? My life was mere chance, a toss of the dice.” I said.

“Foolish mortal. While my spirit fades into the sea, yours will continue into eternity. How I envy you!”

“You envy me? A lifetime of broken promises and unanswered prayers?” I asked incredulously.

“While our lives are similar, our eternal existence is much different. You have hope, but my destiny is certain.”

“Hope? Old man you’re crazy. Can’t you see that my life is over?” I asked.

He looked at me, or maybe through me, and his wizened old face broke into another grin. The air grew heavy with a rumbling sound like rushing water, and he tossed his shaggy head back, roaring with laughter.

He stood up, and up, growing ever taller until he loomed over the very horizon. Then he bent down from his lofty height, and lifted me off the sun-drenched riverbank, holding me in the palm of his now giant hand.

I watched in awe, as his great whisker covered cheeks billowed out, reminding me of a grizzled Dizzy Gillespie. Then, releasing his pent up breath, he blew me off his hand, and I tumbled through the air, like a spore from a dried dandelion.

The next thing I knew, my senses were rudely assaulted by the rank pungent odor of rotting vegetation and cold sloppy mud.

The warmth of the sun was now nothing but a fond memory, and I started to shiver and shake in my damp clothing.

I rolled to my back, and bone-chilling raindrops pounded my face. Using a muck-covered hand as a shield from the pummeling rain, I looked up into the gloomy deluge. Bright red and blue lights flashed in the twilight high above me.

The story of my life; I can't even stop the pain by jumping off a bridge. Maybe that's reason enough to go on.

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