

The Crossing

By Daniel Davis

Rain lashed hard against my face, tiny razors that stripped away sanity and lay the darkness bare and raw. Even Sheila, stout mount that she was, blundered slowly forward, spurred only by the understanding that the way back was perhaps farther than the way forward.

I could still hear Jeremiah's ragged breaths, each inhalation an effort, each exhalation a relief. I had stared down at his small face, expecting his breathing to stop at any moment. Lisa huddled in the corner beneath her quilt, shaking with the fear that had laid her low these past couple days. No matter how much I cursed her, she refused to move. By the time I disappeared into the storm, I loathed her with a fury that rivaled the passion I'd held when we first met. There was a kernel of guilt buried deep within me, one that I was sure would grow and flower in the days ahead, shrinking my rage with hindsight. But I cannot help but feel that, out in the storm, it was my anger for her, as well as my love for Jeremiah, that urged me onward.

"A little further," I whispered into Sheila's mane. I knew the river lay this way. Spring Brook, back the way I came, was closer, but no doubt the valley had been flooded out. I wondered if the river was traversable. I could only pray, something I had not done much since moving out here. This land, open and forever, was no place for God. Even Lisa, daughter of a traveling preacher, only spoke His name in vain anymore. But I would resort to anything to get me to the next town and back again. Be it God or the Devil—or anything in between.

Sheila's hooves stuck in the mud; each step was an effort for her. If she had been any older, she would have collapsed; as it was, the odds of me being able to ride her back were slim. I knew the storm would not pass anytime soon. These downpours were not sudden, like

they were back east; they were as endless as the horizon, approaching with a subtle buildup that was easy to miss if you didn't know what you were watching for, and then striking with the quickness of a snake. Back in her Bible days, before the Lord had been bleached from her, Lisa said the storms were God's wrath at mankind for being at the top of the food chain. "Every beast needs a predator. These rainstorms are God's way of telling us that we are not the true masters of the land."

Would she have stopped me, if she had been of sound mind? Perhaps. Before Jeremiah took ill, Lisa had been my rock. I admit I am prone to inexplicable acts of unpredictability, of giving in to urges that later turn to foolery. Perhaps moving westward was one of them; running out into the storm is certainly another. But I couldn't tell if Lisa was even aware that I left, and I knew that there was nothing I could do staying still, waiting for Jeremiah laborious breathing to cease. Perhaps a cure existed, perhaps not. I would never find it trapped indoors.

Through Sheila's soggy coat, I could feel the dry heat of Jeremiah's cheek. It had permanently burned itself into my palm. I clenched my fist and clung to the phantom warmth. *Let it light my way*, I pleaded, *let it be enough to see me through*.

Thunder peeled over the prairie. It was the first crack I had heard—everything else had been wind and rain. It was too early in the year for twisters, thank God! Though, I had heard that they come whenever they want, the winter and summer solstices alike. The thunder rattled down from the heavens, through my coat and into my muscles, which twitched and ached and cried out in fear. I cursed, instinctively urging Sheila on faster. Good old girl that she was, she complied, though it must have taken twice the effort she was willing to give.

I do not know when I first discerned the light ahead of me. The darkness was solid, as though I were facing an impenetrable black wall that stretched upwards toward the omnipresent

clouds. And then, faintly, there was a glow—distant, yes, but there! I thought it a mirage at first, the wishful thinking of a desperate man. No matter how often I blinked, or wiped the rain from my eyes, or willed myself to stop hallucinating, the glow did not go away. Still, I had no way of knowing that it was real until I reached it.

I wasn't sure what I had expected. I came upon a ramshackle shack, somehow able to survive the winds and driving rain. Outside the shack stood a lantern clinging to a post. The lantern was held so securely that it did not sway an inch. A few yards beyond the light, the darkness resumed, though I could hear a dull roar, as though a stampede of bison were charging past.

Sheila sought out the light, clinging to it like a moth. I dismounted carefully, afraid that poor distribution of my weight might tip her over. She neighed softly, in relief or instinct. I rubbed her head and whispered, "Good girl."

I approached the shack. I had never seen it before; but then, perhaps I had gotten lost in the darkness. The road to the river was tenuous at best; it changed with the seasons, curving one way, then another, carved by the whims of nature. I had never been too encouraged to head any further west than my homestead; I had come far enough, and had no desire, nor the strength, to go any further.

Before I could announce my presence, the shack's door opened. Before me stood a small figure, a featureless shadow emerging from the darkness. A *wraith*, I thought, recoiling. The storm drove any sense from me; for a second, I truly believed I stood in the presence of a spirit.

"Well, mister," it said, "you probably shouldn't be out here."

Not a ghost, but a girl, a child, maybe twelve years old. Her hair was dark, her eyes darker, but her skin was ghostly. She wore an ill-fitting gown, dyed a deep red, that was soaked

through the instant she stepped out of the door frame. She stared up at me, and I sensed no fear in her stance, not even any curiosity, just perhaps some slight amusement at this unexpected visitor.

She didn't invite me inside. She stood firmly in the doorway, studying me. Then she said, "I suppose I have to charge you to cross."

"Miss?" my teeth rattled out .

"My father told me to never do nothing I was good at for free. So I'll have to charge you, even though I don't want to. How much are you willing to pay?"

"For what, miss?"

"The Crossing."

"Crossing?"

Her head dipped in acknowledgement. "You and your mount. I'll take some goods, if you ain't got the money."

"I..."

She raised a hand and pointed at the canteen that hung off my shoulder. "I could use a good one like that. You can have my old one, put your water in it. Your call. I want the canteen, not the water. Plenty of water around."

I took the canteen off and handed it to her, in the hope that she would explain herself better. Instead, she took it, went back inside, and came out with one almost falling apart. She handed it to me.

"Here. It ain't a fair trade, but that's the point."

As I took the canteen, my fingers brushed hers. She was almost as warm as Jeremiah, though her skin was moistened by the rain.

Without a word, she inched past me and moved beyond the glow of the lamp, into the darkness. She paused just before she was out of sight and turned around. "Hurry on, mister, if you're coming. I don't like to be out in this any more than you do."

I followed her, Sheila's reins in my hand, the horse lagging behind. I thought I should offer her some comfort, but being afoot in this weather was even worse than being horseback. My boots threatened to free themselves of my feet with every muddy step I took, and the wind bowed me over, so that I was unable to glance ahead for more than a brief instant or two. I could no longer see the girl, but her tracks were clear enough, and I followed them until I was no longer walking in mud, but was now standing upon a wooden surface.

A spark flared in the darkness, then quickly expanded into a steady flame. I realized I was no longer being soaked. I still felt a fine mist, but the intensity of the rain had let up. Instead, the roaring sound I'd heard earlier had grown up all around me. The realization of its source sent new trembles through my body: the river in flood.

I stood aboard a ferry, old but unique, a wooden awning constructed near the rear to keep passengers out of the weather. The boat rested steady in the currents that raged beneath it. The girl had circled around behind me, to the aft end of the boat. She leaned out into the storm, perhaps to untether the ferry from its mooring. Then she grabbed hold of the paddle—longer than she was tall—and pushed off.

"It'll take a while," she said to me. "I'd take the time to rest up, if I were you. We have a long ways to go."

I tied Sheila to the side of the ferry, then quickly leaned overboard. Immediately, the wind threatened to pull me down into the swirling chaos below. I had to shove back from the railing to keep from falling forward.

"Careful there, mister. Don't jump in after your own reflection." The girl's soft cackle was without humor.

The river was beyond wild; it was rabid, diseased, murderous. How the ferry wasn't being tossed back and forth was beyond my limited knowledge of such things.

"This was my grandfather's ferry," the girl said, as if sensing my thoughts. She didn't shout, but her voice carried easily through the storm. "He passed it on to my father, who passed it on to me. I was born here. Well, a little upriver, I reckon, but right on this ferry."

"What's your name?" I asked, taking off my hat and dropping it at my feet.

Instead of answering me, she said, "My father says my grandfather died on this river. I don't believe him. I can't see anyone of my blood ever dying out here. That's for others, those that aren't born on the river."

"Do you know how far to the nearest town?" I asked.

"Spring Brook, 'bout twenty miles back yonder."

"I meant on the other side."

"I don't know the other side, mister. I reckon there's one that ain't far, but of course, the other side's far enough."

I went to Sheila and made sure she was all right. She was about as calm as a horse can be on water. I whispered a few kind words into her ear, then walked towards the aft section of the ferry. Instinct stopped me from getting too close to the girl. From where I stood, I could finally make out her face in detail, though there was little worth seeing; life on the river had hardened away her youth. She was small but experienced beyond her age. She had a hardness about her that inspired fear instead of pity. She glanced once at me, as though warning me to stay back. I

couldn't blame her for not trusting me; even a fool could see that she inhabited that shack alone. A girl her age, alone on the prairie, was a rare and dangerous thing.

I sat down near the lantern, soaking up what little warmth it had to offer. I closed my eyes and took a deep, slow breath. I tried to breathe for Jeremiah. I imagined his body cradled against mine, flat against my chest. *Breathe with me, son. In...out. In...out. Like Daddy. Like your old man.*

But it hadn't worked then, and it wouldn't work now, miles away. A dreamer can dream, but he can never change reality. I opened my eyes and found the girl staring straight at me.

"I didn't expect to see anybody tonight," she said. I detected, perhaps, a trace of resentment in her voice, though she masked it well.

"I need medicine," I said.

"Any man who goes out in this weather surely would."

"For my son."

"What's he got?"

I hesitated, then admitted, "I don't know."

She nodded. "There's a lot of that out here. You'll learn, or you won't. He'll make it, or he won't."

"He will."

"Perhaps."

She guided the ferry with ease, despite the size and weight of the paddle. I said, "You must be stronger than you look."

"I am."

"Your father must have been a strong man. Your grandfather, too."

She didn't respond. After a moment's thought, I understood. My comments were so evidently true that to acknowledge them would be a waste of effort.

"My son's a few years younger than you," I told her. "His name is Jeremiah."

She nodded.

"I would have gone to Spring Brook, but the valley was surely washed out."

She shook her head. "Don't count on that, mister. That valley is resilient. Folks always think it'll go when the rain comes, but it tends to stay true. Best to remember that."

"How far across is it?"

"Long ways."

"How long?"

She shrugged. "Depends. It's different every time."

I thought of that answer and turned my head to stare into the darkness in front of the ferry.

"How'd you hurt your hand?"

I look back, confused, then lifted my left hand. How had she seen the scars in this dim light? Perhaps she had noticed them back at the shack.

I ran my fingers across my palm and said, "A dog got me, a couple years back. Some mutt folks brought with them, turned wild. It tried to go after Jeremiah."

"You stopped it."

"I stopped it."

"How'd you kill it?"

"I didn't."

She seemed to think about that for a moment, as though there were only two possibilities: the dog killed my son, or I killed the dog.

"I jumped in its way," I explained, "and it went after me. It was hungry, desperate. Tore into my hand. With my other hand, I grabbed a shovel and swung it down hard as I could. Hit the dog between the shoulder blades. It let go and ran off."

That wasn't quite true. Before it had let go, the dog had actually bitten deeper, so deep that I could almost feel its teeth meeting through my hand. The pain had been beyond imagining. *Lightning*, I would've once said, though having watched lightning strike the prairie dozens of times, I can't say as that's accurate. It wasn't just the physical pain, but the knowledge that the dog wanted to consume me. Perhaps I should have described it in more detail to Lisa, so that she could expand upon her rainstorm fable.

The girl was silent for a moment. I thought at first that she was disappointed by my story, until she said, "My father once ferried a man who'd been attacked by a wolf. My father said the man had a scar around his neck from where the wolf had grabbed him. Went all the way around his neck, like a collar. The man got free by stabbing his knife into the wolf's belly. Said he stabbed it so many times, his skin was stained red with the wolf's blood."

I nodded, because I couldn't think of an appropriate response.

"I saw a wolf once," she said. "From a distance. They don't come much closer than that. It was beautiful, but there was an ugliness about it, too." She paused. "But you were attacked by a dog, not a wolf, weren't you?"

"I was."

"I always wondered what it would be like to ferry a wolf across the river. Any kind of animal, really, 'cept horses and hogs and cattle. Maybe, if you got an animal out over the water,

you'd find it's not at all what you think it is. I wouldn't be surprised if a wolf just stood upright and started talking like a man."

Jeremiah, whenever he delves into such flights of fancy, laughs. The girl did not. She stared ahead, as though imagining her conversation with the wolf. I looked ahead too. Sheila had decided to lie down; I wondered whether she would ever rise again and was surprised to find that I didn't really care. Out of the storm, weariness crept quickly over me. I closed my eyes and almost drifted asleep.

Another crack of thunder peeled away the night. Still no lightning. I had to struggle to open my eyes. I found the girl looking at me again, frankly, unashamed to be caught in the act. I said, "How many trips have you made across the river?"

She shrugged. "More than I can count."

"By yourself?"

She nodded.

"How many trips in weather like this?"

"More than a few."

"I'm in good hands, then."

"If you want to look at it that way."

"I do. I..." A yawn overcame me. "I'm weary from the ride. I apologize."

She shrugged again. "Everyone gets tired."

I tried to stand, but my legs refused, so I gave up. I stared into the dancing flame of the lantern, recalling the warm glow of my cabin. I wondered if Lisa was still huddled in the corner, or if she had finally realized that she and Jeremiah were alone. And Jeremiah...had he, too, come out of his fit? I could only hope as such. Hope, unlike reality, is forgiving and

malleable. We can make it what we want, whenever we want, and if we don't want to look at it, we don't have to.

I said this to the girl. I asked her, "Have you ever had a dream where you know you are dreaming?"

She didn't say anything.

I continued, "You think you have so much power. It's your dream; you think you can make of it what you will. So you try, and maybe you succeed at first, but eventually you discover that even this world, your own imagination, is beyond your control. A man isn't even the master of his own thoughts."

"That man who was attacked by the wolf," the girl said. "With the necklace of scars. Would you want one?"

"A wolf?"

"A scar necklace. Something permanent, something no one and nothing could take away from you."

"But at what cost?"

"The man lived, didn't he?"

I thought of this, turning it over in my mind, trying to find the flaws in its logic, then trying to find any logic at all. Finally, I said, "I suppose he did."

Silence fell between us, interrupted only by the storm beyond the ferry. I said, "Were you referring to my son?"

She didn't answer.

I said, "Did you mean my son will survive, that he will pay a price but live?"

She leaned into the oar, turning the ferry in a minute degree that no body but herself could feel.

"Or did you mean myself?" I asked. I added, "I gave you the canteen."

"I don't do nothin' for free," she said.

I glanced forward. "How long until we reach shore?"

"A ways yet."

"How can you tell in this storm?"

"I can tell. It's a long ways across. We haven't gone far enough. So, we have to go farther."

"But how much farther?"

"A ways."

I wanted to turn my head to look at her but found that I lacked the strength. So instead, I focused on the darkness before us. I strained my eyes to see light on the far shore, until my lids grew heavy and I could barely hold them open. When they finally fell shut, the last sight I saw was not light but darkness, and the sound that followed with me was another harsh crack of thunder, echoed by the roar of the wind and river, and the gentle, persistent creaking of the ferry beneath me.