

RIVER OF LIFE

The river is a trickle now as I gaze out from my bedroom window. I'm old and tired like the river. My days are numbered. I rarely leave my bed so I spend my waking moments in solitary reflection.

The river ran strong and wide when I was a boy. I was four when Grampa and I went fishing under the shade of a birch tree at the river. He brought out a plank from the barn for a place to sit. Our lines swayed in the water waiting for a fish to yank on the bait and make it dance. As I diligently watched the line for movement, Grampa told me about his life—the farm, Gramma, and his childhood during the Civil War. He told the best stories. We laughed a lot that day. We caught one fish, though it was too small to keep. We sat out there for hours and I got so sunburned my Maw gave Grampa a tongue-lashing, loud and long. I didn't care, even though every inch of my exposed skin stung. I still remember that day clearly. A tear runs down my craggy cheek. This was the last day I spent with him. He died at the nursing home a few months later. Maw cried and cried, wishing she hadn't been so mean to him.

When I was ten, we had an epic week-long rainstorm. It was so wet and humid the damp seeped into every pore of our house and made us all miserable. When the rain stopped, I couldn't wait to get outside. Maw warned me to stay clear of the river, but I went out to look at the swollen, undulating waters anyway. Our dog, Skipper, went with me. We walked along the river's edge to watch the raging water rush downstream and disappear around the bend. My boot slipped on a rock and Skipper tugged at my shirt to keep me from falling into the river. As he pulled me to safety, the softened river bank fell away, taking Skipper with it.

“Pa-a-aw!” I screamed. “Help! Skipper fell in the river! Paw!”

It seemed like hours, but it was barely a minute before Paw made it to the spot where Skipper fell in. We saw Skipper's head disappear in the muddy water. Paw raced downstream hoping to rescue him, but the roiling river was too fast. Paw came back distraught that he wasn't able to save him. We returned to the house, Paw holding me tight as I bawled uncontrollably. "Skipper saved me, but I couldn't save him."

Several hours later, a tired, shivering, and bedraggled Skipper came home, covered in mud, cuts, and debris from his watery adventure. I screamed with joy, yet still felt guilty for putting him in harm's way. Maw and Paw wrapped him tenderly in a blanket before carrying him to the tub for a warm bath. As tired as he was, he licked us all, grateful that he was home.

We fed him a hearty meal then laid him on a soft bed of towels and a pillow in front of the fireplace where he slept off his ordeal. We loved Skipper before, but now he was a hero for saving me.

I was fifteen when we heard the news on the radio about Pearl Harbor being bombed. We were hopping mad about the Japs bombing our land. Although Hawaii was like a foreign country to me, it was part of our country nonetheless. I was determined to enlist, but Paw wouldn't hear of it, even though he wanted to fight, too. Paw couldn't go because he hurt his knee falling off a horse and walked with a pronounced limp.

I was still determined to go. I waited until I was eighteen to enlist so Paw and Maw didn't have a say. Shortly after basic, I ended up on a ship headed for Normandy and Omaha Beach. We made history that day, but there wasn't an hour I, or the hundreds of other boys like me, wished we hadn't signed on. Some of us prayed, many of us cried or threw up. Most sat stone-faced, dreading what was to come.

D-Day. It was a scene from hell. Just like the day we almost lost Skipper, the ocean waves were unrelenting as we plunged toward shore. We were soaked and chilled to the bone. By 7:40 that morning we were wading through waist-deep freezing water toward our destiny. “Easy Red.” That’s what they called our landing zone. I could laugh at the irony if the pictures in my head weren’t so horrifically vivid. Nothing was easy. The water ran red as we valiantly tried to make our way to shore through all the gunfire and mayhem. Brothers in arms, when one went down we struggled to bring them along and find some cover. Anything but leave them behind. It was a fruitless effort. We could only save ourselves, and barely so.

The rest of the battle was a blur. I can’t recall the details, even though I relive them in my nightmares. The memories meld with the day Skipper went down the river. The mud in the river, the blood in the ocean. They’re all the same. I live my days avoiding the memories, but I can’t escape them at night. Even after all this time, the stench of war still burns my nostrils.

The Army sent me home in a wheelchair, but I still had my life such as it was. I lost pieces of myself, but I was alive. Maw and Paw were so happy and relieved to have me home. They knew thousands of us were lost and were so grateful I was spared. While I was at war, Skipper passed, but he’s buried on a sun-laden knoll on the farm. I went to visit his grave when I got myself upright again.

I found a good job at the power company after I recovered from my injuries. People were kind to us veterans who fought in the war. I didn’t lack for adoring women even though I lacked a leg. One woman in particular, Alice, struck my fancy and a couple years later we married. We had two sons, Frank and Tom. My nightmares subsided during the time we raised our boys. We visited the farm often and my fond memories of the river never abated. The river was tranquil

whenever we visited. Maw and Paw always made our time there special. Alice loved my parents and our boys couldn't wait to return.

I can't remember which days were the worst. When Paw died, then Tom and Frank in Vietnam, or when Maw went through chemo that did nothing but prolong her agony. Alice and I were alone again. But this alone-ness was so heartbreaking we hardly spoke to each other. I retreated to the farm to do the mundane chores that kept the land in full bloom and Alice spent her days at our home in the city. We never considered divorce, but the accumulated loss and sorrow weighed down so hard on us, we couldn't live together anymore.

Just as our marriage dried up, so did my river. The city encroached on my beloved farm. Water was siphoned off the river to provide for the new city folk and their fancy homes. Just as the river couldn't cry, neither could I. I was empty.

The years slowly passed as the river ebbed. Alice is gone, too. Only I, in my obstinacy, live on. So, now I'm bedridden. A nurse, Jessie, comes in daily to take care of my necessities. Then, I wait and watch the river. Soon, I won't have to hold vigil on that slow trickle. I gaze at the spot where Skipper is buried and see his bedraggled figure approach. I feel as tired and worn out as he. I shiver and wait for someone to wrap me in a warm blanket, but it doesn't come. Soon, I won't have to think about it anymore, just as the river will dry up and be gone.

I had a dream last night. Skipper was trotting briskly from the knoll, tail wagging furiously as he approached. He was young as the day he came back from the dead and I was ten again. I hugged him hard as he licked every exposed inch of flesh he could reach. "Skippy boy! Oh, it's so good to see you again." My heart sang through a torrent of tears. Such a homecoming. I knew it was a dream, but I didn't want to wake up. Jessie woke me, but just for a moment before I went back to hold my Skipper.

Jessie heard his last breath and wiped away the tears she saw coursing down his face. Then, she untangled a few strands of red-gold hair entwined in his fingers before she pulled the sheet over his face. “Rest in peace, my friend. Rest in peace.”

I've been in that angst of loneliness, where you're really alone in the universe, except for the dog.

William Shatner