

On the Edge

The man opened the car door and glanced up at a cold and dirty gray sky that was empty and devoid of any promise except more of the same. He stepped out onto the gravel and nodded—the day was typical for mid-March in the upper Midwest, with a bone-chilling wind blowing in from the Northwest, where winter can linger long into April.

The man zipped his heavy jacket up to his chin, scanned his surroundings, and began the short trudge up the gravel path from the deserted parking lot to the woods, picking his way past large and ubiquitous patches of brown sticky mud, the remnants of the most recent late winter snowstorm. He walked swiftly and expeditiously, as though he was a soldier on a mission that could decide the outcome of a crucial battle. However, if you had asked him what the mission was, he couldn't have told you; he might have even asked you the same question, if he acknowledged you at all.

When he reached the edge of the woods, the path forked into two narrower trails, each dissecting a dense forest of bare-limbed maples and oaks, all standing on a heavy brown carpet of their own dead leaves. He hesitated for a moment, looking carefully up and down each curving lane, formulating a decision as though that decision would somehow determine the fate of the world, or at least the world as he understood it.

Or perhaps he was thinking of Robert Frost fretting over the road not taken. Whatever he may have been thinking, he really knew both trails equally well, knew them like he knew the intimate and strangely disparate details of his life, especially the last two years of it.

A brisk gust of wind hit him squarely on the left side of his face. Instinctively, he turned to the right, and the decision was made for him. Mother Nature intervening once again. He

resumed his former pace, noting the absolute solitude as he walked. He heard only the sound of the wind and his footsteps muffled by the wet leaves and soggy earth. Unencumbered by external distractions, he allowed his mind to dwell in the sanctity of his own scattered thoughts, sometimes painful, sometimes not.

As he reached the part of the trail that paralleled an abandoned quarry, the man was surprised to see what appeared to be a human standing very close to the rim, past the tree line, at least three feet beyond the protective fence. From a distance, the man thought the person looked like a young man in a faded army field jacket, or it could have been a hunter's camouflage jacket. The young man's head and upper body were leaning toward the edge, as if peering into the jagged landscape below.

At first, the older man continued to walk on. It was, after all, a public park and what other people did in it was really none of his business. He was certain he wouldn't like it if some stranger approached him and started asking questions about why he was there or what his intentions might be.

And so, he stayed on the trail, moving deeper into the woods. However, a vision of the young man slipping off the edge and plunging head first into the rock-strewn depths below kept dangling in front of him, screening the trees and the sky, intruding upon his most private thoughts, slicing through the cloak of personal intimacy in which he had so carefully wrapped himself. After a few minutes, he turned around. Some force inside him that he couldn't control or even understand was driving him back toward the young man, toward the edge.

When he reached the low rail fence that was intended as a warning against falling into the quarry, the man stopped. The other man, the young man, was now only ten feet away from him

and hadn't moved. The older man could see his face, lean and unwrinkled, eyes directed downward.

The older man took a deep breath to steady himself. "It's a long way down," he said.

The young man straightened up instantly, looking as though he had just been caught standing over a dead body. His head whipped toward the sound of the voice.

"Not much down there to see," the older man continued. "And no way to get there from here. There's a trail on the other side that a few people know about. But the rangers don't like people going into the quarry. Too dangerous. Best to stay out of there."

As the older man spoke, the young man seemed to experience a rapid shift of emotions from surprise to anger to perhaps grudging acceptance that the older man wasn't going away. "Thanks for the warning," he said. "But I'm not going to fall and I'd kind of like to be alone right now. No offense." His head twitched and his eyes began to shift back to the rim.

"I understand," the older man said. And he really did understand. There was a time, not so long ago, when he himself had stood on the same edge and peered down onto the same jagged slabs of gray limestone. But then, the loss of a wife, the woman he loves more than anyone or anything else in the world, watching helplessly while she dies slowly and painfully, can do that to a man. He had stood on the edge and seen his wife's face in the rocks below. She was young again; she was well again. And she was calling to him.

He honestly didn't know what had pulled him away from the edge that day, what benevolent force had led him back onto the trail and into the world of the living. Even now, he didn't know whether or not he was grateful that the mysterious force had saved him from joining her in death. "I understand," he repeated. "But there are many ways to be alone and many reasons to fear it."

The young man glared at him. “Look...maybe...you think you’re trying to help in some way, but you’re not,” he said without much resolution in his voice. “So please, leave me alone.”

“Look, son—” The older man paused immediately after the word son leaked from his lips. He had never called anyone son before, not even his own son. Perhaps if he had, his son would be here with him today instead of working a difficult and unpleasant job two thousand miles away. Sure, they talked on the phone every couple of months or so, and they occasionally exchanged brief and often cryptic emails. However, they hadn’t actually seen each other since the funeral nearly eighteen months ago when they had silently lain to rest a wife and a mother. “Maybe I should go away and maybe I’m wrong to think what I’m thinking,” he said. “But you definitely look like a guy who needs someone to talk to.”

The young man’s eyes didn’t stray too far from the rim, but his expression softened slightly. “I’m all right,” he said. “Really.”

“Perhaps. But I’m not sure I am,” the older man said abruptly. He hadn’t planned on saying that and he hadn’t really felt that way when he had started out on the trail. Or maybe he had felt that way and just hadn’t wanted to admit it to himself. But here in the cold damp air of March, he was suddenly confronted by a legion of marauding memories, demons descending from the leafless trees. “If you don’t want to talk, would you mind listening to an old man for a few minutes?”

This was another statement that surprised him. He had never referred to himself as an old man before. Even now, he wasn’t certain if he was just being euphemistic or if he really was starting to think of himself as old. And that didn’t make much sense. At sixty, he knew that probably half the leading men in Hollywood were approaching his age or even older. Was

Harrison Ford an old man, or Michael Douglas? What about Clint Eastwood? Once again, he fought to regain his concentration. He looked at the young man hopefully.

The young man didn't move. But at least he wasn't looking away, conspicuously ignoring him.

The older man smiled weakly. "It's getting kind of cold standing here," he said. "It's a little warmer in the woods. Let's walk up the trail a ways before we freeze. Besides, you'll be in real trouble if the ranger sees you this close to the edge. They patrol this area regularly." This was a bluff, but he didn't think the young man would call him on it.

For a moment, the young man seemed to consider the offer. Then he unbolted himself from the ground upon which he had been standing statue-like and climbed awkwardly over the fence.

The older man reached out his ungloved hand to steady his new companion. "Thanks," he said once the younger man was secure on the safe side of the fence. "My name is Al."

"Ryan," the young man said softly. He avoided making eye contact.

Al directed Ryan back onto the muddy trail. "I was kind of surprised to see you out here," he said. "The park is usually deserted on weekday afternoons, especially this time of year."

Ryan said nothing, and the two men walked slowly toward nowhere in particular.

Al sensed the awkwardness and the widening distance between them. "Ryan, I'm sorry if I seemed to intrude, it's just that I've stood on that edge before myself. It's only luck, I suppose, or providence that kept me from falling onto those nasty rocks below, becoming a paragraph in the B section of the paper. Not a particularly pleasant way to go, I don't think."

"Yeah...real lucky," Ryan said.

Al chuckled. "I know." Then he slowed his pace to a virtual crawl. "Are you married?"

Ryan, who had moved several feet ahead, stopped and looked back. “Yes,” he said in a near whisper.

Al nodded. “Any children?”

“One. And another on the way.”

Al smiled. “Congratulations.” He stepped off again, catching up with his companion. “I was married,” he said. “I have two kids about your age, I should think. And a grandson who just turned two.”

Ryan said nothing, just kept walking ahead, looking like a person waiting impatiently for the punchline to a long and confusing joke that he hadn’t wanted to listen to in the first place.

Al took a deep breath and looked into the naked woods with the trees silently and stoically awaiting the emergence of a new spring. “It was tough sometimes making ends meet, keeping things together. I’m a teacher, or was. I retired three years ago from Chapin High School.” He paused, wondering if his younger companion was really listening to him or just being polite. He remembered the clichéd image of old and senile men telling boring stories that rambled on and on and had no point. He worried he was becoming that cliché. “Did you go to Chapin?”

“No.”

For at least a minute, the two men walked on without speaking. Al was a little surprised by his own silence. Sure, he had accomplished his primary mission of getting Ryan away from the edge. But he didn’t want to leave it at that. He knew there was more he wanted to say, needed to say. He just wasn’t sure how to start.

The death of a spouse, a life partner, is not easy to talk about, especially to someone who has not experienced it for himself. But it’s always there, the death, the loss, hanging over your

thoughts, your dreams, like a transparent curtain. How do you put that into words? And why would someone else want to listen to those words even if you found the right ones? Let them live, let them experience the tragedy of loss in their own time and in their own way.

As he moved, Al struggled with thoughts long consigned to the deep recesses of his brain, because his rational side considered them irrelevant and possibly even dangerous. Besides, he reasoned, it isn't really the death, the loss of the physical presence. It is the memory. It is the mind-numbing loneliness in a world full of people. It is the love that no longer enveloped him and for which there was no adequate surrogate, unless it could be the son he most likely lost years ago or the daughter who was transferred to a city six hundred miles away, taking his grandson with her.

And maybe it was the vision of his own death, looming in the shadows of his now vacant life, waiting like quicksand for him to blindly stumble off the narrow path and into the suffocating and inescapable trap. He straightened his spine and glanced over at his younger companion. Ryan was plodding dutifully along, his eyes straight ahead. "Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?" Al asked.

Ryan returned Al's look with one of patient indifference. "No, not really," he said. He shifted his eyes back to the trail.

Al stopped abruptly and lightly touched Ryan's arm. "I'm sorry. You go on. I'm turning back."

Ryan halted in the middle of the trail. The wind had died; nothing around them moved or made a sound. "Are you all right?"

Al smiled again. There was so much ambiguity in such a simple question so innocently asked. He hesitated for a few seconds. “Ryan, I know we don’t know each other at all and it’s absolutely none of my business, but I want you to promise me something.”

Ryan stood perfectly still, his eyes focused and his expression blank, impassive.

Al let Ryan’s silence pass for assent. “When you go home, tell your wife that you love her,” he said. “Appreciate what you have, what the two of you have created together. Live each day for its own sake as though it’s a gift. There is no greater power, no greater glory than the love two honest people can have for each other. And then it’s gone before you truly understand what you had.” He stopped and slumped, feeling as though all of his energy had been in the words he had just poured out and hoping that energy had been transferred to someone who appeared as though he really needed it.

The young man didn’t look like he had been hit with a sudden surge of energy. His expression was more one of ambivalence than anything else. “I understand,” he said.

“Sure,” Al said. He knew that Ryan didn’t understand what he had just said. Al didn’t think that he himself would have understood if some old guy had said the same thing to him thirty years ago. Some lessons can only be taught through time and experience. “Good luck to you, Ryan,” he said, rotating away from the young man. “And stay away from the edge.”

Ryan nodded and started walking rather swiftly, putting distance between him and Al.

Al followed him with his eyes for a few seconds, then turned back toward the fence.