

Across the River

A Fantasy on Begging

by Alan Harris

IT HAS BEEN ONE OF THOSE warmish days between winter and spring, but now the sun has set and the dusk is deepening. My bones are weary, and my eyes feel out of round in their sockets as I drive home from the office. I am a casualty of the business world, that whirlwind of meaningless activity leading toward a grand total of zero on the famous bottom line. I now pull over and stop my car alongside the road. I have always wanted to do this, and now I will. No, I won't go back to my prefabricated, prethought, predigested, prerotted life in that meaningless suburb. I will just walk. I will beg. I will have nothing and want nothing.

Non-attachment is the time-honored way to happiness, as proven time and again in the East.

I leave the keys in what was my car. Anyone who wants this thing can take it. I won't be needing a car now. I walk ahead to the next cross street and turn left, not knowing or really caring what street it is. Ahead of me on the sidewalk a boy about twelve years of age is walking his little black-and-white spotted dog. The dog crouches in some tall grass by a utility pole and does his duty. The boy praises him with "Good boy, Jock. Good boy." I continue to follow them, but they pay no attention to me. Soon they turn into the sidewalk in front of a small yellow house and go in. The fading daylight is giving way to the artificial light of the buzzing streetlights.

Where will I stay tonight? I don't know. There are many houses along here, but I don't want to ask anyone to put me up for the night. Shall I try to walk to a motel? I have about \$150 in my pocket. But no. Why would I want to stay in a motel and pay money like a businessman? I will just stay

in my body tonight, wherever my body happens to be. If it's in a mansion, so be it. If it's on a park bench, so be it. In a gutter? Fine.

I walk along for a few blocks and turn left again. Where will I go? I have now given away everything except my clothes and my wallet. Shall I walk north up to the street where the bridge is, cross the river, then walk west? Or shall I walk south out into the country? I could even walk east into the "changing" neighborhood. It doesn't matter. Why do I even need to walk? Will I be picked up as a vagrant? No, not with this suit on, and a trench coat. Am I crazy? Should I be locked up? I don't feel crazy. I just gave up everything, that's all. No big deal.

Yes, I guess I'll go north up the street, turn west, and cross the bridge. I don't know what's beyond the bridge very far, but it doesn't really matter, does it? Something is always everywhere.

I start walking north just like I know what I'm doing. As I reach the bridge street, a policeman drives by in his squad car. I smile and tell myself what a bad boy I am,

leaving everything sensible behind and not playing the middle-class game. I should probably turn myself in, but I don't think I will. No, I need to see how this comes out.

I turn west and soon reach the bridge, smiling at how ridiculously symbolic it is to cross a bridge on my way to the unknown. I should write a novel about this, or at least a short story. Maybe I won't live long enough to fill up a novel. Over the railing the dark, peaceful river is just visible in the fading dusk. Two ducks swim effortlessly and smoothly out from under the bridge, each leaving a little wake. One of them sees me and quacks. Then the other one quacks. Just one quack apiece--no big deal for them. I lean against the railing for a long while, lost in thought as I stare down at the deep, dark, moving waters. With a little inner ceremony, I take off my necktie, stuff it in my pocket, and continue west across the bridge.

Now I'm on the other side of the river, but strangely it seems as though I'm heading east. I haven't turned around, but as I walk I could swear that the sky ahead of me is beginning to lighten as if the sun were rising instead of setting. There is a fragrance in the air, too, that I haven't detected in a long time. The smell of lilacs. It isn't time for lilacs yet, but there is that unmistakable fragrance. Yes, the sun is rising in the west. I look around and see a robin pulling at a worm in the grass along the sidewalk twenty feet away. The robin notices that I am too close, and gives me a staccato scolding as it flutters up into a nearby maple tree.

There is a little park not far ahead, a park I have never noticed before. Not surprising, as I don't recall ever having walked in this neighborhood. On a bench by the sidewalk sits an old man with short white hair, staring at the approaching sunrise in the west.

"Hello there," I offer. "Why is the sun rising in the west?"

"That's where it always rises," he replies quietly. "That's where it always rises."

"Mind if I sit down here and try to figure this out?"

"Have a seat."

"Do you live around here?" I ask him.

"I'm right here. I live right here."

"On this park bench?"

"For now, yes."

"Do you have a house or an apartment?"

"No, I don't need one."

"I see." I watch a small woodpecker walk straight up the side of a large oak tree about halfway across the park. He switches on his head like a jackhammer and attacks a rotten branch. The sunshine is now catching the top leaves of his old tree.

"Where do you eat?" I ask after a long silence.

"Right here." He points to his mouth.

"That's good," I chuckle. "That's where I eat too. No sweat, huh? Life pretty much takes care of itself, does it?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you have a family?" I ask after a short silence.

"Nope," he replies quickly but without emotion.

"A job?"

"Yes, I do have a job. I meet the people who come across that bridge, and I answer their questions. It's usually not too hard. They ask pretty easy questions."

"Are you a philosopher?"

"Not so's you'd notice. I just sit here and talk to the people. It's not too hard."

"Do you think it's necessary to fit into the city rat race? Go to work, come home, spend money, get tired, go to bed, every day and every day?"

"Well, you get your weekends off," he replies with a wry grin.

"You know what I mean. What is the point of all of this gaining and losing, loving and hating, waking and sleeping?"

"I don't know." He rubs his white-stubbed chin. "What do you think?"

"I don't think there's any point to it. That's why I've decided to just wander and beg for the rest of my life."

The old man smiles a little and looks me squarely in both eyes. I can see infinity in his deep blue eyes. His glance is amazingly deep, yet warm and harmless.

"You're going to beg? What if no one gives you anything?" he asks, those blue eyes twinkling now.

"Then I'll die."

"And what will that accomplish?"

"What will driving a late-model car and living in a suburban home with TV-watching kids and a security-loving wife accomplish? Nothing. There's not a thing to lose. I need freedom."

"Maybe so," he mumbles quietly. "Maybe so."

He rises quickly from the park bench, nimble for his apparently advanced years, and pulls me to my feet. "You can't get along begging without some training. High thoughts won't fill your stomach. Why don't you come along with me for awhile? I'll show you how I do it."

"Okay."

It must be an odd sight, I think to myself as the two of us walk along the sidewalk together, westward into the rising sun. Robins are hopping unpredictably in the grass, cocking their heads and stabbing the ground for their worms. A chattering cloud of sparrows flutters over us, heading toward the branches of a budding magnolia tree. They all perch in it and nearly fill it up, jumping excitedly from branch to branch.

"My name is Fred," I offer. "What's your name?"

The old man looks a bit startled. "I don't go by anything, but if you really want to call me something, just say Pete."

"Do you think a guy can make it as a beggar in this day and age?"

"I know a guy can. I'm making it. It's not very hard. Now let me ask you a question. Are you religious?"

"Nah. I used to be a Presbyterian, then turned Methodist, then dropped the whole thing. Religion just seemed like a flimsy kind of entertainment there at the church. The congregation was always carping about how communion was too long or too often, or they didn't like this hymn or that sermon. It seemed like a joke that wasn't very funny. How about you? Are you religious?"

"No, but I do like to see that sunrise every day. I do like to see these birds, and the flowers that are blooming this time of year. I have nothing against religion, but I get mine here in the outdoors."

"Do you ever feel guilty about begging? Not making a living, and all that?"

"Not at all. I figure if people want to give me something, that's their business. I won't fight it. If they don't want to give, that's fine too."

"Did you ever go through a long time when no one gave you anything and you nearly starved?"

"Not really. Most people are pretty nice. They don't mind."

"Do the police ever give you any trouble?"

"No. Why, do I look suspicious?"

I laugh. "No, you look like an old guy who lives in one of these little houses along here and has a pension."

Pete gives me another deep look and says, "I am on a kind of pension, but there's no money in it."

"What kind of pension do you mean?"

"One day I decided I had worked enough, and I retired. Done. No talk, no argument, no social security. I just retired, and my pension is being able to watch the birds and flowers in the park and think the thoughts I want to think. I don't have any boss telling me what color my necktie should be."

"That's exactly the kind of retirement I decided on when I walked away from my car."

As we walk along, a warm breeze floats up, bringing the fragrance of lilacs again. Pete suddenly stops me and nods to indicate a small green house with white shutters. "Now here's a lady that always gives me something. She doesn't give a hoot what I look like or who I am. She just gives me something every time. Watch."

He walks up the sidewalk and knocks on the front door. A gray-haired lady comes to the door and immediately smiles through the storm door as she recognizes Pete.

"Good morning," Pete says, in a friendly, non-fake way. "It's a nice morning, isn't it?"

"Yes it is," she replies, opening the storm door. "Can I get you a little something to eat this morning?"

"Why, yes, that would be nice. And I wonder if you could spare a little for my friend here. He's just walked across the bridge and doesn't know quite where to turn next. Do have a little extra something for him?"

"Of course. Just a minute." She goes back into the house. I notice the painted concrete deer in her front yard, and I admire her petunias beside the front stoop. She returns with two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I walk up to the door and take one, and Pete then politely takes the other a nod and a smile.

"Thank you very much," I say with more gratitude than I've ever felt before. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this sandwich. You are a very kind woman."

"That's all right," she smiles back. "It never hurts to help a little."

"Thanks again," Pete waves at her as we return to the sidewalk and resume our wanderings. "See, that was easy. This sandwich will last you the rest of the morning, Fred, and you can spend all morning doing anything you want."

"Where are we going, Pete?"

"Nowhere, Fred. Did you want to go somewhere?"

"No, I just thought you were taking me somewhere."

"You already took yourself somewhere in your life on the other side of the bridge, and you didn't like it. Now you're going nowhere. Do you think you'll be able to like that?"

"It's hard to say. It's so much different from the usual mindless hustle."

We come to a large viaduct supporting a busy highway. As we walk under it, Pete gestures for me to sit down. He sits upon a big scrap of six-by-six lumber, and I squat on one heel, the way my father taught me when I was a boy.

He points his index finger upwards, raising his voice above the whizzing and thumping tires of the cars passing directly over our heads. "These people are all going somewhere, Fred. Do you know where? No, you don't. And I don't either. Maybe someone told them that they should go somewhere, so they did. Maybe they had to build something, and to do that, they had to go buy some tools and materials, and to get them, they had to find a job to make some money, and they had to go to college to get a job, a *good* job, not just any job. And maybe they felt like they had to have a wife and a family, because everybody does. They're all going somewhere, Fred. They all think they know where they're going, but not a one of them knows."

I sit still for awhile, shift my weight to the other heel, and sit some more. A huge diesel truck thuds across the viaduct, and the roar of its powerful engine gradually fades away in the distance.

"What's the point of our not being part of them?" I ask whimsically.

"No point at all. Why does there have to be a point? I just watch things, watch people. I walk around, smell flowers. That's all. I don't do much. There's not much to do, really. Your heart beats, your lungs breathe, people give you food. It's not bad at all."

"Don't you ever want to go somewhere or make something or do something, Pete?"

"Nope. Why bother? Those folks up there that are going places can do that. They can build their buildings and work in their little office cubicles and write their reports and drive their cars till they end up dead, just like I will, and just like you will. What have they gained? Maybe a nice casket and a six-inch obituary, which I won't have."

"Can we get out from under this viaduct?" I suggest, annoyed by the loud rumbling of the traffic.

"Sure, we can go anywhere we want, Fred."

"Let's go back to the river and watch the ducks," I suggest.

We walk back east toward the river. The spring morning is bright and beautiful now. Dandelions are in full yellow bloom in most of the little front yards. A large woman with wrinkled stockings is leaning down and weeding her flower bed. She nods to us politely and anonymously as we walk by.

Soon we reach the river and sit down on the bank. I snap off a long stem of grass and clamp it between my teeth. No ducks are around. The water is very smooth and peaceful.

"You do this every day?" I ask. "Just wander around anywhere you want, and sit and think?"

"Sometimes I think, sometimes I sit, sometimes I walk, sometimes I lie down." He lies down slowly and meaningfully on the grass.

"Do you ever have pain or feel lonely?"

"Nope."

We are both quiet for a long time, looking out over the quiet river, smelling the lilacs whenever a new breeze comes up. After a while eight mallards swim by--a green-headed male, a drab brown female, and six half-grown ducklings. They are quacking and plunging after food in the water, seeming to enjoy each other's company greatly.

I begin to feel a strange ache inside me, and I know that my new life here is just not going to work. I can't even live a whole day like this, let alone the rest of my life. I will go out of mind with boredom.

"Pete, I don't think I'm going to be able to live the life of a beggar. It just doesn't feel right to me."

"I know, Fred. That's what everyone says who comes across that bridge. They stay a few days, a few weeks, maybe only a few hours like you, but sooner or later they go back. They just need to come, and they just need to go. It's no big deal. Why don't you go back to your family now, and no one will know any different."

"But my wife probably has the cops looking for me, and I left my keys in the car along the road."

"Well, you did make that decision. But I don't think it'll be so bad. Why don't you just go back over the bridge and see what's over there?"

"Okay, Pete. Listen, I really envy the way you can lead such a calm life, and how you are so kind. Maybe someday I will be able to retire like you did, but not yet. I want you to have this as a little token of my appreciation." I hand him a fifty-dollar bill.

He brushes it away. "Thanks, Fred, but I don't need it. Your heart is in the right place, though. If you ever decide to come and see me again, I'll be hanging right around here. I don't go very far. Like I said, there's really nowhere to go."

"Good-bye, Pete. Thanks again for taking me along with you."

I walk up the slope to the bridge and wave to him as I head east over the bridge. I find myself thinking that it will somehow be night on the other side, and that this has all been a dream. I reach the other side, but the sky is just as bright as ever. The

sun is still climbing in the west, higher and higher as the spring morning gains warmth. I reach the road that leads to my car and turn south, fully expecting to have to walk all the way home. No doubt the car has been stolen by kids or towed away by the police.

As I walk over a familiar rise, I see my car ahead, just as I left it. I walk up to it and look into the left window. The keys are still in it. No one has harmed it. I open the door, get in, start it up, and drive towards home. The only thing is that sun still in the west. What time is it? Am I late for work? It doesn't matter. I meet a police car, but I am driving within the speed limit, so I am invisible to the law.

As I approach the block where my house is, I wonder what I am going to tell my wife. Just then I hear a faint but unmistakable whisper in my ear. It sounds like Pete asking, "Where are you going?"

I smile as I pull into my driveway, and say aloud, "I don't know, Pete. Maybe nowhere."

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