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My Own Riverside Fairy Tale

I've been told by old people and dreamers that, a long time ago, there was a river that defied nature. Blacker than ink, it had no name, but it had stories and whispers which perked the ear of any passing listener and engraved its legacy in the heart of bards. For one, no bird dared to soar over its fogged shroud and no fish swam within its thrashing depths. Neither flower or weed ventured to grow on its gravel banks. Still, the river, seemingly, was alive. It writhed and twisted, groaned and moaned, more like a valley of furious serpents than any river known by man. How horrid a river! The fog— oh! The horrible fog! It was a relentless predator, looming over the river and concealed what lay on the other side. Like a bleeding gash or festering wound upon the land, travellers could not bear the sight of it. A flirting glance would strike horror in the bodies of travellers, chilling the blood colder than the bitter waters which so haunted and rattled the heart. For what reason, then, would any adventurer want to cross?

It was this daunting river which an odd Ferryman called home. Evidently, he owned little. He always sat in an old canoe, splintered and weathered from many days, years, and perhaps decades of adventure. A grim-shaped oar, eternally dripping with the river's filth, was permanently clasped in his hands with a white-knuckled grip. The Ferryman was never seen without his oar. They whispered that it was but an extension of his arm. Witnesses say he wore a simple robe, tattered at its ends and concealing a misshapen, gangly form. If he was born or created, it was never known. They did not wish to know. Since the river was evil, it stood to reason that the ferryman, too, was evil. After all, those who crossed with him did not come back.

One side of the river belonged to humanity. The other, supposedly, is a land unconquered.

Once, I heard that there was a prince, the descendant of a kingdom which is no more.

This prince, the sole heir to a rich and luxurious kingdom, held his head high and his ambitions even higher. His crown hungered for more than what his lofty position could give. It was this craving that led him to the river. Posh and proud, he dismounted his steed and stomped down the gravel shores. His gait buckled once enveloped by the river's sinister fog yet, his desires compelled him to go on until he met the Ferryman.

"Gold! Land! Power!" the prince cried. "Once I cross this damned river, I'll have it all!"

"I can take you across but nothing is free. What will you give?" The Ferryman croaked and extended his hand. The river appeared to surge and swell as the Ferryman lifted his arm.

"Give? Now?" The prince scoffed. "Why, you decrepit thing, once I conquer that distant land I will shower you with all the riches a man can dream of! Let me aboard and take me across. Serve me well, and then I can promise you great fortune, enough to crown you as a shining prince among wretches!"

The Ferryman said nothing. He retracted his arm and beckoned the young prince aboard his skiff. The prince skipped aboard.

With impossible strength, the Ferryman kicked away the shore. The river seethed and the current hissed at the prince's sudden weight. The skiff rocked back and forth, water creeping into the vessel like the angry arms of a beast still unknown. The arrogant prince quailed to no avail. The fog grew heavy and robbed the prince of his breath, creating a secret seen only to the Ferryman to the river. So, the prince sank.

The Ferryman clicked his tongue and shook his head three times.

The young prince was never seen again, and it's rumored that the river gained another ripple that very day. Rumors dart around. It's said, when you put your ear toward the water, one could hear the river gurgle, quietly, "*greed... greed... greed.*"

Some time later, perhaps it was the same day, a maiden arrived at the river's bank. The soles of her feet bled and the clothes on her figure rivaled the tatters which the Ferryman wore.

The Ferryman extended his hand at the sight of the lass. "*I can take you across but nothing is free. What will you give?*"

"Oh mister ferryman, I have nothing to give, yet I must cross," the maiden said softly. "There is nothing left for me on this side."

"But nothing is free." The ferryman's stretched hand extended further, until a mere breath away from the lady's face.

The maiden thought long and hard.

"I have nothing but my memories." The lady bowed her head to the Ferryman. "Take the happiest among them, my most precious memory, in return for my safe passage across."

So, the Ferryman reached within the maiden's magnanimous mind. His fingers assorted boundless memories, both sad and happy. As the Ferryman rummaged, his fingers sprung upon the maiden flashes of each memory. With eyes closed, she dreamt of a life so sweet that honey could not compare. As a child, she played until tired in the warm hold of sunshine. In the throngs of bitter nights, she was embraced by the arms of her mother, arms once impossibly strong which grew weak as the edge of their mortalities galloped ever closer. She wept upon witnessing heavenly departure bestowed upon her dear mother. Oh! The beauty of death and being! Of being in death! A life so bitter, yet so honeyed. The Ferryman plunged his hand deeper and plucked the ripest of these memories. The lady discovered her mother's face was erased, and her once hearty

embrace repressed to a cold nothingness. It hurt incredibly, more so than any mortal wound could.

The Ferryman lifted the memory like a precious gem and marveled at its brilliant glow. Almost wordless, he said, "It is enough." He gestured for the fair lady to board his skiff. Gently, he took her hand and led her aboard. She shed a tear but did not know why. As she boarded, her hand rested over her forehead, where her precious memory was once stored.

The Ferryman kicked away from shore, and briefly the river became their shared world. The Ferryman's wicked oar met the odious water, their two forces meeting not in combat or conflict but in a gentle dance. To-and-fro, the oar flirted with the river's depths, to and fro. An arrow free upon the wind, the canoe was a comet traveling space everlong, like the moon sailing across the sky back and forth, to-and-fro. The Ferryman and maiden did not speak, they did not have to, for this was a moment grander than either of them.

The journey felt impossibly long. Was the river not a river but an ocean in disguise? Yet, in a moment, it was over. The fog grew lighter, both in weight and radiance. The young maiden's lungs felt twice, perhaps thrice, expanded and she took a yawning breath as a brilliant light cloaked the skiff. A land unbelievably bright met the lady's gaze. The Ferryman's skiff, so it's said, was drifting upon luster, his oar playfully scoping at shining splendour until the skiff, lady, and himself blurred into a single brilliant silhouette.

The Ferryman, for once, let go of his oar. It clattered against the rustic canoe and echoed, once, then twice, and then a third time. Wood on wood clashed, though it sounded like holy bells to the young maiden. With both his own hands, he took the lady's hands and helped her over the canoe. The Ferryman clapped and waved the maiden goodbye. She had crossed over. One step led to another, until she was frolicking into greener pastures.

Here, the evil river, apparently, was no more. In its place was a serene scene, quiet and still, like the river never existed. It was a land brilliantly bright though she dared not to shield her eyes from its beauty. She casted her head back, to catch a glimpse of the Ferryman. In the distance, over yonder he ventured back, until the Ferryman was swallowed by the brilliant light and he too, became nowhere to be seen, as if he never existed.

Unburdened yet unsure, the young maiden braved to move forward. With the old world to her back and the horizon beckoning toward her, she devoured the new world in front of her. The hole in her mind ached, though her legs continued carrying her further. She knew not to mourn her lost fragment, but she mourned anyway. After all, she knew that to cross to the other side means to give something away. So, the lady prolonged her journey into the other side, a place still unknown to us on our side. What became of her no one knows for sure.

What is known, though, is that those with empty hands do not cross, and those who cross do not come back. What's unknown remains unknown until you venture to the other side.

Some say that somewhere, far away, on the gravelled banks of the river, the Ferryman still waits, ready to take the next soul across.