

YOU'VE GOT TO CROSS THE RIVER

Roy Leavins had the lean muscles of a man who cut his own firewood and the legs of a runner. He wore blue jeans and his voice was as soft as his flannel shirt but there was flint in his eyes. He was white, fifty one, and by birth a Baptist, but he had put all that behind him and become a shaman. He worked to a tape of a drum with a beat like a pounding heart. It changed his brain waves, taking him deep into the unconscious. From here he could see what was wrong with a patient. He could heal him with the help of the spirits.

The boy's mother did not believe in spirits, but she had tried everything else. Acupuncture, allergy shots, inhalers; nothing worked. The boy got worse. Since his grandfather's death his allergies had progressed to asthma and bronchitis. He lay on the bed, his face blue, his breath ragged as sheet metal. He watched Roy with hot eyes, but he did not speak. Roy turned to the mother.

"I'll take a look," he said. "I'm going to need quiet. Shut those blinds. You can stay in here. But don't talk. Don't touch me."

The last thing he wanted was to be shocked back into his body. He needed to concentrate. When he journeyed, he would be aware of his back against the cold wooden floor, his lungs rising and falling, the beat of the drum fuzzy through the speakers. But he would also see the other world. It would be as real to him as this one. He would go down into the body of the boy and find the root of his illness.

He set the radio by the head of the bed, took a rattle out of his pack, and laid a pillow on the floor. He wrapped a red bandana around his head and shook the rattle in the four directions, calling on his spirits. Roy never said who they were. A man's power was his secret. To talk about it weakened it. But they were two species of the same family of predators, and he called them Rolley and Indigo. He began to dance, shaking the rattle. The mother's eyes widened. He looked no different; it was how he moved that frightened her, like an animal was in him. Roy felt heavy. He sank onto the floor and turned on the tape of the drumming. A hole opened up in the earth, and he went down into the body of the boy. He was in a tunnel full of roots and worms. Spider webs hung from the ceiling. Black water dripped from the walls. Death was in the boy, cold and wet, but it was not his death. He had swallowed his grandfather's soul. He had given grief a home in his body.

Roy called to his spirits and Rolley came running. With blow torches and chain saws they cut the gnarled roots. They sawed the spider webs. Rolley dragged a hose out of the dark and flushed the place clean. The smell of sunlight entered the cavern. An old man appeared at the end of the tunnel, cursed them, and disappeared through a wooden door that hung on rusty hinges. Roy took a deep breath. The drum was pounding, but his heart had slowed to match the rhythm of the earth.

He stepped through the door.

Night seized him. He was in the old man's back yard. Roy knew without being told it was the boy's grandfather. He could make out a shack, a small garden, sunflowers bent under a load of black seeds. A river ran below the house. A row boat, half rotten, was tied to a willow on the bank. There was a whisper in the grass and the old man came at him with a hoe.

Roy side stepped and called for help. Rolley grabbed the old man from behind, wrapped him in cellophane and stuck a mailing label on him that read: Land of the Dead. That was how he talked to Roy. He didn't say much; Roy had to watch what he did for clues. Rolley wanted to ship the old man to the land of the dead; he wanted to clear the boy's soul of grief. Roy held a hand up.

"Let me talk to him first," he said.

Rolley loosened the wrappings but stood close by.

"Old man," Roy said, "you've got to leave this boy alone. You're killing him. He can't breathe."

"I just want somebody to remember me. You go seventy years and nothing to show for it but a head stone no bigger than a kitchen tile."

"I can help you cross the river." Roy pointed. A sheet of light fell on the water. The current was swift and strong. Behind it, rose tipped mountains climbed in the distance. The sun was rising and the peaks caught and held the light. It was the prettiest thing Roy had ever seen. He was careful not to look too long.

"It's like no place you've ever been," he said. "Nobody is hungry or scared. They sing all the time."

"I never could sing." The old man sounded suspicious. He pulled at his left ear. "I busted this one when I was little. I can't carry a tune."

"Over there anybody can sing."

"What do I have to do?"

"Let go of the boy."

The old man picked up the hoe and flung it through the dirty window of the shack.

"God dammit," he said.

Bats flew out of his mouth. They circled Roy, but Rolley caught them in a butterfly net and held them underwater until they became puppies. They climbed the old man's legs, licking and whining, then scattered in the grass.

"Anger won't help you," said Roy. "The only thing that's going to help you is getting in that boat."

"Why've I got to do it?"

"Every man gets to live once. After that you've got to cross the river."

The old man sat down. His toes poked through the holes in his dress socks. He was in a disheveled Sunday suit. Red clay clung to his lapels. Bits of straw and roots and grass stuck out of his sleeves. He had been down here, falling apart, for years.

"I don't have to," he said. "I can stay right here. I got a good house."

Rolley measured it with a tape measure. It was seven feet by four feet, no bigger than a coffin. He held the tape up so the old man could see it. His face fell. Rolley pushed on a wall, experimentally, and the house fell down. Doves began to sing in the willows along the river.

"I got the garden," the old man said. "I can't leave it."



Roy walked through the overgrown rows. The pumpkins had rotted on the vines. Dry bean pods rattled against each other. The lettuce was chewed to pieces. The carrots were no longer carrots. In his garden, the old man had grown fists. Roy pulled them up and piled them at the old man's feet.

"Take these with you," he said.

The grandfather picked one up and flung it. The fist shrieked and whimpered. Rolley caught it and put all the fists in a burlap bag and burned them. He dusted off his hands. The smoke formed a face. It was the old man's mother.

"Reuben," she said. That was the old man's name. "Come home. You been gone too long."

The old man started to cry. He stood up and followed the smoke down to the river and got in the rowboat and started to row. But in the years he had lingered his muscles had atrophied. The current pulled him downstream. Roy and Rolley ran beside the boat through the willows and cat tails and threw him a line. The current was strong and the rope frayed. The boat sagged downstream. Rolley became huge. He stood on the earth like a sunrise and pulled the boat to the bank. The boards were rotten – the boat had waited on the man all these years – and the water came up to his ankles. He was crying. At times he was a little boy, then he became a grown man again. He rolled his pants up to his knees as Rolley hauled the boat to the bank and held it fast.

Indigo, Roy's other helper, came and went as he was needed. He showed up now, stalking silently through the reeds. He prayed over the willows, and two came forward. He produced a saw out of his backpack. Indigo had one of everything in there. Once, peeking, Roy had seen a spare moon. He sawed boards and patched the boat and glued it with pine pitch from his pack. Rolley did a little dance, holding the rope. The boat was watertight. The old man climbed in. The sun had risen. Their shadows mingled with the shadows of fish. The shadows were arguing. That was normal. Roy ignored them.

"Here's how it is," he said. "Rolley will row you across. The whole time I'm going to sing. Our shadows will travel beside the boat half way. Then they'll come back. But your shadow will go on with you. You'll never be alone again."

The old man reached down, put his fingers in the water and held his shadow's hand over the side of the boat as Rolley pushed off without touching the water.

Indigo and Roy sang,

Over water
so deep you forget
yourself, your life unraveling,
your life is a channel



through which water flows,
erasing, eroding, your memory
is going.

Indigo produced a bodhran and beat it as Rolley's oars slapped the water in time. But none of the drops got on him. He rowed to the other side. The boat stuck in the mud. The mud sucked at the boat.

Roots grew around it and held it fast. When they reached for Rolley he chopped them with a machete, and they withdrew. Roy sang his power song from his throat, from his belly; his words pierced the air.

“Rolley, do you have the book?” he said.

Rolley produced from under his fur – he took it out of his lungs, maybe, he had a way of holding things in his body – *The Book of the Dead*.

In it were the rules, the etiquette, of death. Don’t look a dead man directly in his eyes. Don’t say his name. It makes him nervous. Don’t breathe the dead man’s damp breath. It’ll sicken you.

“Read him the lesson for ghosts,” Roy said.

Rolley turned the pages. The water shrank from the boat. The roots quit writhing and lay still. The mud held the boat tenderly and listened.

“You shall not cross this water again, unless God sends you in a new body made of light dried and hardened into muscle and bones. You shall not cross this river to hurt or harm. Your new life is here. You don’t know the wonders that wait for you.”

Together, Rolley, Indigo and Roy chanted,

We thank you for your life.
It was a good life.
You loved the boy you’re leaving.
You loved his way of speaking,
his calm mornings.
He was like a bird singing and it comforted you
in the hour of your death.
But you have grown sour. You have grown old.
Your soul is sick and it has sickened him.
You are pulling him down, and we will not allow it.
Go to your peace, grandfather, go to your rest.

And Rolley held out his hand. The old man took it and stepped onto the bank. Birds rose from the grass and became angels – the same wings, the same feathers, but the bodies and faces of women. Their voices were soft as they sang him to sleep. They carried him on their shoulders into the light.

At the last minute one of them turned and said, “Thank you. You have done your work. Go home.”

Rolley rowed across the river. The current was still. He stepped out onto dry land. The water had not touched him. Indigo and Rolley shook hands with Roy and rose into the sky. Roy walked through the tunnel – it was clean and dry now, like fresh dug dirt – and climbed a ladder into his body. He sat up slowly and turned off the tape. He was in the twilight between worlds. He felt the power holding it all together – the chipped wooden desk, the black director’s chair, a blue bean bag spilling its white beads on the floor. The mother was crying.

She said, “I don’t know what you did, but it worked. His color’s changed.”

Roy knelt by the bed. The pallor of death had left the boy’s face. His eyes were ringed with black, but his skin was bright. He was sleeping. His lungs rose and fell, as innocent, as effortless, as doves.

“He hasn’t slept like that in months,” the mother said. “What did you see?”

Roy thought of the love between the boy and the old man, how strong it had been to survive death. He thought that kind of love was a power and a secret. He took off his bandana and folded it carefully. He laid the rattle on top of it in the pack.

“Nothing,” he said, “sometimes people just get sick.” And he picked up his bag and his radio and went out into the light.

Stephen Cavitt writes regularly for the *Chattanooga Pulse*. His garden is overgrown with weeds. He has begun eating them, using Euell Gibbons as a guide.