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Riding the Cassville Ferry

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Riding the Cassville Ferry

Barbara: There's a weird little line on the map and it crosses the Mississippi. I think it's a ferry.

Victor: It's a lock and dam.

Barbara: Lock and dam lines are straight and black. This one's dotted and blue.

Victor: It's not a ferry.

Barbara: I really, really want to ride the ferry.

Victor, voice rising: There is no ferry.

Barbara, voice rising: Where's your sense of fun?

Victor, voice really rising: There is no ferry!

Barbara, shouting: Don't you shout at me!

"Where's the Cassville ferry?" I had asked the girl in the gas station three years ago. "I've lived here all my life," she said. "Never heard of it." That was the first time Vic and I rode the Cassville ferry.

This time we saw a sign, small and weathered, pointing down an untraveled road that could have been a farmer's driveway. Take a left off of Iowa 51 and drive three miles on Farnuff Road. Don't give up when you reach the "V" that splits into two unlikely paths. Go right. When it starts getting swampy, you'll know you're close.

"Farnuff Road," Vic says. "Nice."

Farnuff Road burrows along the Mississippi's bottomland, first through black, alluvial soil stubbled with rows of newly harvested corn, and then into a small wilderness of birds, raccoons, and dragonflies glittering like jeweled kites stalled on a slow breeze. It's pavement at first, goes by a farm where today two people are photographing horses in a field, corkscrews over a rusty railroad track, and just in case you still think you're en route to Wisconsin, it abruptly becomes a dirt track. About the time you've given up all hope, you'll come to a sign with a distinctly homemade look, "STOP," it says. "Fee: Passengers \$4, Cars \$11, Semis...." There's an empty parking lot made of dead weeds and mud and a break in the trees that reveals a remarkable view of the river lapping at your feet.

“Maybe the damned ferry only runs in the summer,” Vic snaps. “It’s clearly closed for the season.” It’s been a long time between coffees and he’s full of cantankerous disbelief. There was a car here when we arrived, but it left. Someone in a van showed up, drove around, and then disappeared back up the road.

“Be a tree,” I tell Vic, not quite ready to give up. Lately, he’s been reading *The Zen Path* and spouting annoying advice that he doesn’t follow.

A couple drives up in an SUV. They circle the parking lot, look forlornly at the empty landing ramp, and drive off.

“What a stupid place to put a ferry,” Vic tells me. “It’s in the middle of nowhere.” The Mississippi is wide here. Across the river in Wisconsin, a distant mountain of black coal rises beside a huge, white power plant. Everything is outsized, far too large to make sense. Most unlikely of all is a who-knows-how-high crane with a small house balanced on its attenuated metal withers. Why a house?

Minutes tick by. In an unZen voice, I snap, “Be Zen.” Vic grows pensive. He stares at the opaque skin of the river, rolls down the window, and decides to enjoy the biting wind and watch the mysterious passage of hidden currents. He breaks the silence and points with his chin. “We must be somewhere,” he says. “There’s an out-house over there.”

And then, a low-floating raft constructed of steel appears out of nowhere. It is nudged upriver by a white tug that may have been ripped from the pages of a child’s Little Golden Book. Just when it seems to be passing us, the ferry abruptly swings ninety degrees, and a ramp plops down on the bank. Three cars disembark. A passenger in the final vehicle waves. Vic is photographing, trying to get the tug in the foreground and a huge barge in the background.

Our Windstar bumps and creaks onto the ferry in the wake of a Corolla with Minnesota plates. The Corolla swoops ahead of us and is first when a friendly-faced lady waves us aboard. All of us scramble out of our cars to take in the view. Vic notices a sign. “Don’t Leave Your Car Until You Pay.” Now we pay.

The Corolla’s occupants are youngish, very attractive, very sophisticated, and very tall. Soon we are all standing on the deck in the wind-swirled sunlight, floating in the same dream, pushed by a toy tug among the Mississippi’s sparkling green-brown eddies. I’m

five-foot-nothing, wearing sandals with socks. My hair is wild and windblown. I feel tiny, unsophisticated, and disheveled. But I am taken by the couple, especially the woman who is cheerful, composed of large quantities of energy, and charmingly animated. She offers to take our picture when our camera reappears, and exhibits admirable competence in spite of my burbling, over-helpful instructions. The captain, in a dollhouse-sized cabin high above our heads, glances at us with unfocused, bored eyes.

We have moved downstream quickly on the Iowa side. I look up and see the barge that Vic was photographing. It is between us and the Wisconsin shore. A moment of panic. We're headed directly toward its eight double rows, each a city block long, lashed together, and piloted by a good-sized tug. Does our captain remember that it takes forever for such a large barge to turn, much less stop? Is he actually awake? And then, we slide behind the barge without drawing closer. My muscles ache from surging adrenaline, and I'm aware that I overreacted, but every once in a while, when I'm near water, I feel a sudden jolt of fear. I turn towards Vic, wanting reassurance. Vic and the couple from Minnesota have their backs to me. They are deep in conversation.

In the summer of my junior year, along with my best friend Joan, I went to Europe on the *Urallia*, a ship whose ticket price allowed college students to fill the cabins. The boat had been gussied up to resemble a cruise ship, but nothing could change the fact that it was an Italian World War II destroyer, so small that it took thirteen very pleasant days to complete the passage to Southampton.

Our return trip took even longer. Nine days out, I stood below the top deck on the bow. Each night, I'd be there, waiting for the moment when the sun ceased to be a golden orb and shimmied into the sea with a wild surge of color. Gradually, in ones and twos, people gathered on either side of me.

I was a seasoned sunset watcher by then, having, if you count both trips, witnessed sundown from the deck of the *Urallia* almost two dozen times. I'd spent my early years on the East Coast and was familiar with the look of waves when they approached the shore. Waves in the middle of the ocean were an entirely different matter. At sea, they ducked and bobbed, rose and fell as if tethered in place.

That evening, everything changed. The water was smooth as glass. There were no waves. None at all. From horizon to horizon, the sea was an endless skin, flat and sleek as a window pane.

The unnatural sheen of the water was deeply unsettling. No one in the crowd around me spoke. We were all staring fixedly at the ocean, waiting for nature to return to its natural order.

I noticed a dull, black line, thin as a pencil lead spanning the horizon from end to end. Gradually, the line grew to the thickness of a straw. And then, the width of a cigar. Suddenly, it was racing toward me, rapidly doubling, then tripling its size. Still, I remained rooted in place. Distantly, my mind was taking in the details; the wave's green-black base, the luminous turquoise body, and the transparent crest, lit by the sunset into aquamarine glass webbed with glittering ropes of foam. Suddenly, there was no sky, only a vertical cliff of water framed by my deck and the deck above me.

"Hold the rail!" someone shouted. Up and down the deck, we had been frozen in place. The words released the spell. We turned at the same moment. I held my breath and grabbed the inside rail just as a ferocious weight rammed my body into the bulkhead. I was under tons of water. My ears filled. Sound was muffled yet full of deadly thunder—the noise of the wave surging over the ship. And then there was silence and I turned back to the sea. The sun had not moved. The ocean once again was a flat mirror bejeweled by the sunset.

Years later I told my story to an experienced sailor. "What hit your ship was a rogue wave," he told me. A tidal wave crosses the ocean with barely any notice. A rogue wave is as dangerous as it is rare. Most sailors go a lifetime and never see one. Bad winds, bad currents, bad luck, and a rogue wave can sink a ship before it can get off a distress call.

That evening, we were ordered into our cabins and told to bolt the porthole cover, a big, heavy, metal circle. Nothing to worry about, they told us. We'd be passing through the tail end of a hurricane. Four of my bunkmates and I looked forward to an adventure. Laura, who had an aptitude for seasickness, was experiencing a different kind of anticipation. The night passed peacefully.

The next morning we awoke to what sounded like an explosion. Our dresser drawers, latched the night before, catapulted across the

room and, with devastating force, smashed into the opposite wall. The first volley of the approaching storm struck the Urallia.

Then came a second wave and a third—all day, with the roar of a fireman's hose, torrents crashed over the top deck of the ship. Most alarming, as we clung to our bunks, was the crash and suck of mountains of water that roared from deck to deck, then pounded back into the sea.

The ocean was still heavy in the afternoon when at last we were reluctantly allowed out of our cabins. I moved through the corridors, repeatedly thrown from the right wall to the left and back again, until I managed to tumble into one of the couches in the main lounge. Slowly, the Urallia would sink into a trough, and the view out the windows would fill with nothing but alarmingly close, roiling green water. Then she would right herself and surge up the bank on the next wave until the windows showed only perfect, blue sky.

On the deck of the Cassville ferry, I ruminate about my fear of water. Part of me believes that there are more rogue waves out there: the bus that turns the corner just as you step off the curb, the lump you find in your left breast, the child you lose sight of in the mall.

I dismiss these thoughts and walk to Vic's side. He leans into the wind. By the look on his face, I imagine he feels like a figurehead on an old-time ship, life pushing by him cold and bold. "This is great," he says, "we have to do something like this every weekend. We can..." He is speaking rapidly, trying to communicate his happiness and dreams for the future in a single, thirty-second burst. I press my cheek against his warm jacket. Like Vic, I have become absorbed in the moment, the way I always am when a day trip feels like a circumnavigation of the world. Vic is in the palm of the river's steel hand, but along with his pleasure from water, wind, and sun, I know his mind is scrolling through thoughts of our health insurance policy which ends at Iowa's borders, the Monday test he will give in Abstract Algebra 22M-120, and the leak in the roof. Vic's mind can easily fill with bad weather, what I call "neurotic storms." I have an easy access to joy. Vic requires a book on Zen, the latest vitamin, and an hour of meditation. He is a man of two minds, one running from tigers, the other running for joy.

We are staring downriver when the sudden appearance of Wisconsin draws the Cassville ferry to a stop. The four of us climb

back into our cars. How deliciously inefficient. Our great American transportation system has successfully delivered four travelers, two cars, one tug, and one barge across the mighty Mississippi.

The Minnesotans disappear. We drive into the fairytale, Rip Van Winkle village of Cassville. In the glory days of river trade, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cassville, a minor punctuation mark in the river's lengthy story, had a few shining years. Now, it's likely that her remaining citizens work at the nearby power station and live in faded mansions of merchants, comfortable homes of shopkeepers, or one-of-a-kind cabins owned by of a long line of "river rats." Today, Cassville is a barely acknowledged detour off a neglected, poorly traveled Wisconsin highway or the destination of a pleasurable ferry ride across the Mississippi.

We drive into town. Vic waits in the car. Like a moth to a flame, I approach a lovely old building, attracted by the word "Antiques." On the shop door there is a hand written sign: "We're locked. Come to the restaurant next door." Inside the restaurant there is the scent of coffee rising from a shining espresso machine. A handsome, smiling woman leads me back to the antique shop. Vic passes us, waving. He is, no doubt, heading for espresso that, based on aroma alone, will rate a ten out of ten. The store is almost devoid of antiques.

"It's really my daughter's shop," I'm told. Not yet fully stocked, it is inhabited by more or less empty shelves, odds and ends, and a few very lovely, very expensive chandeliers. There is a long glass counter with whatnots and jewelry as well as gorgeous, handmade chocolates created by the daughter and sold at Hershey bar prices. I leave without an antique, but with a bag of lovingly made sweets instead. Too rich for my diet, but I give an indulgence to Vic and save the rest as a gift for Aunt Lucy.

Soon we are on a hunt for the sunset, tracking roads that wind through rough hills that double back at the last moment, keeping us from a sunset view of the Mississippi. At last we are parallel to the river. Just yards from our tires, snowy egrets stalk in the shallows. We turn down a small road, cross railroad tracks, and enter a park. The park is draped in long shadows trailing from orange and gold molting trees. The sinking sun ruffles through the grass, painting the tufts red. We are alone except for a handful of trailers, the last holdouts of fall. A long, smooth meadow tilts slowly toward the Mississippi and we walk beside the river. We are so close to

the water that when it occasionally erupts over small rocks, foamy breakers threaten our shoes.

“Jeez,” Vic says. I know what he means. Uncounted tons of water pass a foot or two from our feet. The moment seems magnified, more real than the cold wind on my face, the stones under my thin-soled shoes. How is it possible that such a thing exists, or that the distant, Iowa cliffs can contain its flow?

Ignoring the universe beyond its banks, the river continues its journey. Endless years. Uncounted millennia. Mindlessly, it delivers its body over and over again along the same two thousand miles. Upstream, downstream, and wide wide water.

Again, I tell Vic, “Be a tree.” I see the river through his eyes. How much easier it would be if he could know that his tidal waves of fear, grief, and joy have meaning only in the moment. We are, after all, walking beside a large river on a small planet orbiting a medium-sized sun in an eternally expanding universe. I wrap my scarf around my neck and face, a poor defense against the wind. At last the sun disappears behind Iowa cliffs. The river continues its journey.

Back in the car, we discover Indian Creek Road. We could be in the Smoky Mountains for the steepness of the hills and occasional decaying houses. In one picturesque but dilapidated hollow, we encounter what appears to be a chicken zoo; long lines of cages and free-ranging fowl, all adorned with surprising phosphorescent color and wearing unlikely feathered crowns on their heads, fluffy snowshoes, or preposterous displays that spring from their glorious rumps.

We pursue river views with little luck and continue driving back and forth among barely used roads, each one more enticing than the last. Together they form an unraveled spider web in the half-tamed range of hills.

“A Yellow Brick Road,” Vic says, and his face is ruddy in the vivid rose light that flares long after the sun has finally set.

“It’s the Zen Path,” I tell him.

Eventually, we find a familiar highway, return to Dubuque in starry dark, and cross the bridge over the Mississippi guided by a brigade of festive lights strung across girders. Below us, light from paddleboat casinos illuminates the river. Dinner, a coffee, and talk over the thumping of country music, and then back to our hotel and to sleep.