

# The Ferryman

ED BOK LEE

*'Tell me, O Sibyl, what means this mustering at the river? What purpose have these souls?'*

Virgil, *Aeneid*

**L**ouy is the name of the man who picks you up from prison. After almost eight years, you hardly recognize his face, pained and smiling in the piercing noon sun. In fact, only after he's approached and clasped your hand, teetering on his one good leg, yanking you with surprising gravity, are you fully sure he's got the right man.

Yo dawg, he says, it's good to see your ass. How you been?

He smells fresh, like air cleaner, but feels soft, mushy, like old fruit when you hug him back.

Tell him: Shit, look at you, all grewed up, thinking how naked and oddly youthful your voice feels in the hot, wayward wind.

The prison parking lot eventually leads out to a landscape of soybean and sugar beet fields. A plane flies overhead in the distance, trailing a thin, putrid stream. Thank him for picking you up, but decline the Newport he offers you in his car. Understand if Resolution Number One falls, the twenty-three others

might as well be dominos. Instead, close your eyes and enjoy the vague smell of burning oil, which is the last thing you ever thought you'd relish.

It's been a long time, dawg, Louy says, still grinning, shaking his shaven head with old bite marks on the back of his scalp, from that time you assumed all of you were going to die.

On the highway, feel your hand out the window, cupping the wind like a disembodied breast. A semi roars by, honking, maybe at all the blue exhaust Louy's old Lexus is kicking out. The din and reek and jerky way Louy navigates makes your mouth start watering, in a bad way, but keep quiet, even when he accelerates to flip off the driver of the semi, now directly to your right.

Fucking biyach!! Louy screams at the fat man's grin. I eat motherfuckers like you with cheese!

Remember: that's just Louy; some things never change. And after all, isn't this the same quality that made you want to recruit him into the gang in the first place, back in the day? Loyalty, above all. What was he, twelve or thirteen at the time, though he already had some hair on his lip, already had been driving his grandmoms to the doctor illegally for a year.

Punk-ass redneck, he says. People be all crazy these days. You'll see.

At Wendy's, order the chili, though you've been craving a bacon double-cheeseburger for three weeks, ever since you learned you were going to be paroled early due to overcrowding. Right now your stomach might kick even that back up. As Louy flirts pointlessly with the bored-looking black girl at the register, notice folks in the restaurant, how in general people all seem bigger and more beautiful than you remember. Middle-aged women in shorts and frosted blonde hair, their fit bodies and tan limbs and something not quite, but like, annoyed over-confidence. Turn away when they look back at you. Have bell-bottoms really come back in? Men look thicker around the middle and adolescent boys look taller. Young girls look older and old women look younger. Turn away.

Don't worry, dawg, Louy winks, opening his wallet fat with weathered

cash. I got it all planned out. Just fill your belly for now. Dessert comes later, if you know what I mean.

What was the name of the newest brother whose birthmarked face was blown off in that meth lab in Stacy? Meng? Moua? Watch the boy-man Louy now limping to the counter to buy a second double-cheeseburger. Remember how no one else but him ran back into the flames with you that otherwise quiet mid-July evening.

Keep the change, he says to the same Wendy's worker whose eyes now roll far, far away from him.

You were the one to give him his first deuce-deuce, though that's probably the last thing on his mind now as he digs in his pockets for his phone, which he appears to have lost. Remember the glitter of his black eyes, now dulled by the years. You, on the other hand, feel more lucid than you remember ever having been: alert, senses heightened. The sensation, strange, like you've been given a new layer of skin. But also like you can't quite remember your own first name.

In the bathroom, wash your face and ignore the momentary frustration of trying to figure out the soap dispenser. Forget this filthy, water-spotted restaurant mirror that reflects a face whose eyes still appear partially trapped in that square of polished steel you just spent eight years whispering at in your cell.

At the Halfway House, Louy says nothing of the conditions or strong scent of Pine-Sol; the other men, one mumbling to himself, another in the living room watching *The Price Is Right*. It's the first two minutes of silence between you and Louy, maybe ever.

In the "game room," he explains you can come over to his house anytime, even though he lives with his mother and grandmother.

We gotta get some home cooking onto them bones of yours! he says, slapping you right on the dumbass skull tattoo on your right shoulder that you regretted the same very late night you got it over a decade ago: now, just a blurry

sneer as if to mock who you were.

For reals, dawg, it's good to have you back.

Though overly enthusiastic, you know he means what he says. His heart may be odd, twisted, but it is not small.

Good to be back.

Thank him and take his number down on your palm.

On your bed, in the room assigned to you (not much larger than a cell) by the house manager, run through the resolutions you made in your head. Like when you were a kid and collected baseball cards. Stop on the ones you are most proud of, turn them over in your mind, like this bright and shiny one:

*Love the loveless like they possessed broken wings.*

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On Wednesday, in group therapy at the Halfway House, sip the way-too-strong coffee. When it's your turn to hold the rainbow-plumed staff, tell the live-in counselor, Bob, how your parents are dead and your sister lives in California. Ponder his questions about who you think you are, and one thing you have learned about yourself during your time of reflection.

Well, there's no rush, Bob eventually says. Life is an ongoing process.

Fortunately for you, there's another new man to deflect everyone's attention. A Sikh with a turban who insists on being called The Taliban. He's the only other non-black or -white, though who knows what he considers himself.

Don't laugh like the other men when this man goes on about how good life is in Denmark, how Denmark is the dream. Even though he admits he's never been to Denmark.

A garbage man is the exact same as a surgeon or king, he says, while trying to balance the talking stick upright on one palm. Even though he's not making full sense, try to listen.

It might be important to have some kind of kin here, like in the joint.

Possibly even this brother with a smile like he's being burned alive by choice.

Down the hall from your room is the F&M room. Fantasy and Masturbation, as it was explained to you by Dale, the other resident counselor. A man with thick arms and sausage-link fingers comes out of the room and looks blankly at you, then shambles off toward his room in the opposite direction.

Next to the F&M room is the Library, which is half the size.

Back in your cell, you'd almost finished reading *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman before your early release. In fact, wasn't there the tiniest part of you that wished you had an extra day or even month? Do not let such thoughts disturb you, make you think you're going to do something stupid to end up there again.

Pick up the one Stephen King novel that you haven't already read. Even if most of the scariest parts in them have lately felt cartoonish.

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Like the transition counselor in the joint told you, the first few weeks will be the toughest. Go about the chores assigned to you in the house. Make small talk if you can. Understand that your life needs time to catch up with your body, which has been pushed out of a great terrible iron-and-concrete womb. You're alive, remember—all night, until the muffled rumble of someone's snoring through the wall by your head begins to shape your dreams—remember, remember, everything.

Mornings as you get back on your feet, help the other broken men tend the garden in back. The soil, cool and rich, is the blackest you've ever seen; feels good against your hands. The sun hot against your sweaty back. At lunch, taste the snap peas so sweet and fresh you begin to feel dizzy and slightly nauseated when you eat too many at once. The Taliban is going on about the various breeds of dogs the Chinese and Japanese have cultivated over the centuries. As you

watch him diligently suck the marrow out of every last one of his chicken bones, think: the world is full of beautiful, useless information.

Whatever you do, don't think of contacting Mai. It will lead to no good. Instead, concentrate on the job you find after thirteen days of searching: a dishwasher in an elderly center.

*The past and future are deceptive drugs*, you once scrawled on the invisible journal inside your brain.

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For seven hours a day, you rinse, scrape, and scour food off fake, unbreakable china, glass, plastic, and aluminum. The home you work in is an upscale one, called Assisted Living. You have a separate entrance and are almost never seen.

A place filled with more wandering ghosts than living laughter.

You don't mind. It feels good, even cleansing, to fill your lungs with the pure, hot steam of the industrial-strength dishwasher—instead of the razor-y vapors you know in a heartbeat you could find at any bus stop or street corner.

In the joint, they gave you twenty-four cents an hour for putting Pier 1 Imports end tables and lamps together. Now it's \$7.85. Feel fortunate. Keep your head down. Don't talk too much. Don't think: what does it matter, anyway; we'll all eventually end up like that old man fallen there, or that old woman breathing heavily by the elevator—lost and mumbling to yourself, boiled alive by time.

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After a week, your boss, Denise, who wears a hairnet and has pale, crème puff upper arms like an albino sailor, comes back to the dish room with a plate of frosted gingerbread cookies and asks you if you'd eventually like more responsibility.

Lie and tell her you would. Believe that it's not a bad thing to each dawn at the bus stop look forward to the shoreline of the dish room, the anonymous clatter and steam muffling all that might otherwise drift you out along the city's sea.

Of course, not everything will be easy, especially on bright days. You will wake up in a sweat for no reason. Understand, as others in group therapy discuss, these dangerous thoughts are only thoughts. This feeling that you don't belong, that no one wants or needs and so can't see you, is the real phantom.

Open your eyes.

Believe that the kid who died in that KFC drive-by on Lexington, like you, shouldn't have been there in the first place. He should have been home. Or anywhere. Like a normal, decent person.

Like you now.

Rise and accept the feeling in your heart that it couldn't have been any other way. That the universe has a master plan. Forget the twisted expression on the Mad Cambodian's face right before Jojo sprayed him with bullets like the dude's ghost would otherwise survive forever to take vengeance after vengeance.

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On yet another rainy day, take the 21 bus to work, or wait and take the 21A. The 21A sometimes has more seats. On the other hand, there's that girl who sometimes shakes her hips to her headphones on the 21. The one who looks like she'd smell as good as Mai on Christmas Day after the big bonfire.

Remember to remember your age: twenty-seven. Now an old man to this fresh-faced (who knows, probably) college student.

Convince yourself that Mai, by now, has probably moved out of state and taken her daughter with her. Do not imagine that the girl is yours. At least three homies vouched that she was fucking someone else only six months into your

sentence. Remember that she had slept with at least two other members before moving on to you. What you both promised each other in that sleeping bag does not exist anymore. Those bright new mornings that seemed to be waiting for you both to wake up. Squeezing her waist with your two spanned hands, joking that you could almost touch thumbs and middle fingers. Remember how you laughed and laughed at her American name when you first heard her called it at the Famous Footwear she worked at: Beverly. How she refused to walk near you through the mall the rest of the afternoon. Finally, she changed it to Genevieve, which she said had a better nickname, something she'd always wanted. By then you'd learned your lesson. I can see that, you said, slowly nodding your head. Yeah, yeah, Genevieve . . .

The name she signed her final letter to you with: Genie.

Who knows what all her wishes have turned into now.

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What's the matter, dawg? Ain't nothing to be afraid of.

The night is warm, but this breeze is cool. Keep walking on the gravel lot back to the car.

Come on, dawg!

Wait by the door for Louy to open it up so you can get inside.

I been saving up for weeks. I thought this is what you wanted.

Tell him it's not.

Shit man, did you get all religious on me or something?

Wait for Louy to see that you're determined not to go back into the massage parlor.

Fuck it, then. I don't know about you, but my ass is here to nut.

Wait while he goes back inside, drunk, limping, stinking of the air freshener you're sure he's spraying under his arms.

On Hiawatha Avenue, the sky—early autumn orange and purple and fire-blue—resembles a candied bruise.

From inside Louy's rust-chewed Lexus, smoke a menthol and watch a load of teenagers park and stumble out with vague grins on their faces and cash from what one drunkenly repeats "the casino" in his sloppy hands.

Curse yourself for wasting so much time with Louy these past several weeks. Pool and darts three nights a week. Hours in his basement blowing up tanks and shooting Arabs online. For allowing him to invite you into his home to sit with his grandmoms, who lost her right leg in the war and all through dinner insisted on holding your hand.

On the drive home from the Hiawatha massage parlor, Louy is quiet at the wheel.

He tells you in monotone how he glimpsed through a crack in one door a Hmong girl who couldn't have been more than twelve years old. In a silk, dragon-embossed robe, seated atop an old, hairy-chested white man who must have weighed 500 pounds.

Silence.

That's how it goes, he finally says, staring forward at the wide-open road.

Gang shit? you ask.

He shrugs. Just like it's always been, bro. The names and faces change, but the deeds, them stay the same.

Instead of going into the Halfway House after Louy drops you off, wait in the shadows for his un-muffled Lexus to pull away, then cross the bridge over Highway 35 and walk down to Lake Street. Though you're not exactly sure what you're looking for, you know you're not going to find anything good at the Halfway House tonight. The place is a repository of bad spirits, walking ghosts, and demons ever since around the time the cops came and took The Taliban away for allegedly exposing himself in a flower shop.

Something about the smell of coming rain in the night reminds you of when you were five years old, those months when you bounced around, finally ending up with your grandmother. In her basement, where you slept,

the old country was stored up in boxes and a few sad leather suitcases. Your mother dead, you're sure, from the nail room vapors, and your father working construction in Wisconsin. People, always Asian, would visit the old woman at this house off Nicollet. At first, you thought she was just popular, had a lot of friends. But eventually you understood that there was a room at the back of the first floor, where she did face readings and other forms of prognostication. Strangers crossing in front of the television. Strangers flushing the toilet, only some washing their hands. Strangers leaving flowers outside the front door. The memory dim, but sometimes you would sit on the kitchen floor, playing with the old bones she didn't use anymore, a mortar and pestle full of green and black seeds like tiny eyes—half-listening to her face readings in a language you could barely understand.

*Stay.*

You can almost hear her long-departed voice whispering to you now on this, your favorite claptrap footbridge, rattling high over I-35W, accompanied by all the surf, headlights, and horns in the night.

Once, far below, there was a path through these grasslands that Native Americans tracked buffalo along, or so you either dreamed or heard in a rare, lucid moment at school.

*The world is a story only, exactly as good and true as its telling, you think.*

A city bus rumbles directly below you, followed by a stream of cars, three semis, another bus . . . like an infinite, unchanging river of need, longing, and sin.

Ease the hard grip your hands have on the quivering guardrail, and, instead, turn and angle your body hard like a rudder against the wind.

