

The River of Life

“The meds aren’t working,” Amanda Bristol said.

To pull it down over her knees, she tugged at the hem of her—what would you call it? Not a dress. It had no waistline to separate the skirt from the bodice. And certainly not a gown. It was too formless and not at all elegant. Perhaps you could call it a shift or maybe a smock. It looked something like a sleeveless choir robe, though not so long. To be honest, you would think it was a huge potato sack with holes cut for the head and the arms, except it was made out of red cotton, not brown burlap.

“Well, we might have to increase the dosage, or even switch to another medication,” Dr. Orvos, her psychiatrist, said, looking down at her file.

Amanda wondered whether he even saw her. Was she just another faceless patient in the long line of the day’s appointments?

“I’ve tried them all. Lithium, Tegretol, Depakote, Lamictal, Zyprexa, Abilify. Nothing works. This isn’t a medication issue.”

“Depression is always an issue of brain chemistry, and you’re here for a medication consult, though you should be talking about your personal issues in therapy. Research shows that the combination of medication and therapy works best in treating Bipolar II Disorder.” He sounded like a journal article.

“The whole notion of having to pay someone to talk to me is so depressing.”

Amanda tried to shift in her armchair but couldn’t: she was wedged in too tight.

“And then, my first therapist wanted to talk about my mother, not me. The second kept asking how everything made me feel. And now the third just wants to know the evidence for everything I say and to argue about my beliefs. Therapy is a waste of time.”

“Well, psychotherapy is not an exact science like psychiatry,” Dr. Orvos said in the way an engineer might speak of a construction worker. He still hadn’t made eye contact with her.

“No one gets it. I’m depressed because I’m lonely. I’m lonely because no one wants to be with me. And no one wants to be with me because of my weight.”

“Then, in addition to taking your meds and going to therapy, you should see a nutritionist about a weight reduction plan.”

Take a pill. See a therapist. Go on a diet. He had a simple solution for everything.

“Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, Nutrisystem, Slim Fast, the Atkins Diet, the South Beach Diet—I’ve tried them all. None of them work either. I’m hungry all the time, and, besides, eating and drinking are my only comfort.”

“You’re caught in a vicious cycle: you’re miserable because you’re overweight, so you eat and drink to comfort yourself, which causes you to gain weight and makes you more miserable. And alcohol is a central-nervous-system depressant. Your drinking isn’t helping your depression, you know. Have you considered going back to AA?” He wrote a note in her file.

“I’m done with AA. I’m done with meds. I’m done with therapy. I’m done with weight loss programs. In fact, I’m done with everything. That’s it. I quit.” Suddenly, Amanda’s voice had a ring of determination to it that surprised even her.

“What are you telling me?” Dr. Orvos sat up straight, glancing at his watch.

“I’m sick of my life. I’m not going on like this anymore.” Just uttering those words out loud brought her a strange sense of peace.

“Are you saying you want to kill yourself?” He looked up fully for the first time.

“I guess I am.” She felt better all ready.

“We absolutely have to discuss this at length, but this is just a fifteen-minute medication consult, and I have another patient waiting. I can see you again tomorrow at the same time. But I can tell you right now: whatever the problem, suicide is not the answer. We’ll find a better solution tomorrow. You can put off killing yourself for twenty-four hours, can’t you?”

“Maybe.” She wanted to leave her options open.

“Look, I want you to remove all lethal means from your home. Guns. Knives. Pills. Anything you could use to kill yourself. Okay?”

So now he was taking a serious interest in her?

“Sure. And, while I’m at it, I’ll have them cut off the water so I don’t drown myself in the bathtub, and turn off the electricity so I can’t lick my finger, stick it in a socket, and electrocute myself, and remove the roof from my house so I don’t get up on it and jump off, and then shut down my street so I don’t throw myself in front of a bus.”

“Stop joking. This is no laughing matter. Do you have anyone you can call?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be suicidal.” She had never seen her lonely reality so clearly.

“Then I’m giving you the number of the Suicide Hotline.” He scribbled the number on the back of his card and handed it to her. “Call them if you are feeling like hurting yourself. In the meantime, I want you to agree not to kill yourself for twenty-four hours and to sign a no-suicide contract.”

“On one condition.” She relished the foretaste of bitter irony.

“What?”

“You promise not to sue me if I break the contract.”

“You understand that I can have you involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital if you refuse? My first priority is to keep you safe.”

“Hah! Your first priority is to keep your bank account safe. Don’t worry, there’s no one to sue you for malpractice if I die. But if it makes you happy, give me the paper. I’ll sign it.”

Dr. Orvos drew a photocopied form from a folder in his file cabinet. After Amanda signed it, she stepped out of his office into the waiting room, and the next patient stepped in. That office door was just a turnstile for a steady stream of pill-popping, relief-seeking patients, she thought.

Well, she had finally found her relief. How odd, though. She had thought of suicide many times before but always pictured it as an impulsive act. First, a whirlpool of loneliness, a drinking bout, and an eating binge. Next, pangs of guilt and remorse, a tearful fit of desperation, and a moment when it all became unbearable. At last, the deed itself. The way it turned out, though, she had made the decision in a state of relative calm and even engaged in a bit of banter with the good doctor.

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Out on the crowded sidewalk again, Amanda would have walked with a light-footed step, if her build had permitted it. Instead, she waddled her way up the street, not knowing exactly where she was going and not caring. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last, she said to herself. Free from all the painful memories of the past, free from the lonely burden of the present, free from the bleak expectation of the future. No more pills. No more therapy sessions. No more diets. Just freedom. Whether today, or tomorrow, or next week, it didn't matter. She was already savoring the sweet taste of her deliverance.

Suddenly, she stopped dead in front of a man in a suit carrying a briefcase and coming towards her.

"Doug? Doug Lethe?" she said when he was a few steps from her.

The man halted. "How do you know my name?"

"It's me. Amanda. Amanda Bristol. From high school."

A look of perplexity.

"Don't you remember? We went to The Honors Academy together. There were only fifty-three kids in our graduating class. You have to remember me."

"I'm sorry, I don't. That was fourteen years ago. I have no recollection of you." He looked at his wristwatch. "And besides, I'm late for a meeting."

He stepped around her and continued with long strides down the street. How was it possible to be so large and yet to remain invisible? He had seen her every day for four years and never noticed her once. The story of her life.

Oh well, it didn't matter. Soon she would be free. She was already free in her mind. Before long she would be free in her body too—or free from it, rather. In the next block she spotted the sign for O'Flannigan's bar. Why not celebrate her newfound freedom with a drink?

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She squeezed into a booth against the left wall and caught her breath from the walk. At once, a college-aged lad wearing a white waiter's apron and a green T-shirt with the bar's logo appeared with a notebook and pen in hand.

"What can I get you?" he asked, his eyes fixed on a tight-skirted young lady in heels who happened to be passing in front of the plate-glass window.

"Give me a double Johnny Walker Black on the rocks."

"Coming up," he said, without ever looking at her.

A minute later he set the drink on the table and left. Amanda raised the rim of the glass to her lips, puckered as if to kiss it, and took a sip. O Johnny, she thought, the only man who ever made me feel good. The only one who was always there for me. The only man I ever loved . . . Well, except for Jack Daniel. No need to be jealous, though. I'm enough woman for two men.

Amanda drained the glass and signaled the waiter for another drink. Was everyone looking at her? She could feel their eyes upon her, yet when she surveyed the other patrons, no one was paying her any attention. Was she invisible to them too, or had they stared at her in horrified disbelief and then turned their eyes away? She was all too familiar with that shocked stare and then those averted eyes. Among adults, they replaced the taunts and insults of her classmates, going all the way back to grade school.

Fatso, roly-poly, butterball, tub of lard, blimp, Patti Fatty, chunky monkey, chubasaurus, porker, fat pig, stupid cow, hippopotamus, elephant, beached whale. She had been called by those names more often than by her own. Even the polite euphemisms—overweight, stout, portly, corpulent, rotund, Rubenesque, obese (morbidly so)—however well meant, caused no less pain. They all came down to the same thing: just plain fat.

On the right side of the room sat two slender women in their mid to late twenties, sipping strawberry daiquiris. Probably secretaries who had just gotten off work. A good-looking man standing at the bar had turned his head towards them. Maybe he winked at them. They giggled like schoolgirls. When Amanda looked at them, they raised their eyes, then quickly looked back down, and giggled again. She was sure they were laughing at her because a man like that would never give her a second look, or even a first.

So what? The insults, the stares, and the laughs, as well as the inattention, the neglect, and the disregard would all be over soon.

“Anything else?” the waiter said, looking at his watch. Maybe he was almost through with his shift.

“Bring me another one.”

Amanda remembered how she was the only girl in her class who didn’t get invited to the senior prom. In fact, she didn’t get asked on a single date all through high school. Or college, for that matter. Or after college, when she started working as a data analyst. Truth was, she had never been on a date.

Amanda finished her drink, left some bills on the table, and struggled to get out of the booth and onto her swollen feet. On the street again, she plodded slowly along, still not knowing where she was going, still not caring.

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It was a fine spring afternoon. The temperature mild. The sky a clear blue. Before all too long Amanda had wandered the two blocks east out of the commercial district. Trees lined the side of the road, their recently bare branches bursting into green leafage. Round about, birds flitted and chirped. The wind blowing in her hair gave her a sense of freedom. Relaxed, carefree,

her head swimming pleasantly from the drinks, Amanda drew in a deep breath and let it out. She wasn't sure where she had left her car. If she found it later, fine. If she didn't, that was fine too. In any case, she wasn't going to work tomorrow. She was through with that as well. Say, didn't this road lead down to Mill River?

Amanda trudged on, her weight shifting from side to side with each step, like a boat rocked back and forth by the waves. Ten minutes later she had reached the steep riverbank. It was a good thing too, for she was entirely winded from the short walk.

Although as a child she had visited the river, just a quarter mile past the commercial district, Amanda had not returned there since and had never looked at it carefully. What a beautiful scene it was. Tall grasses and wild flowers covered its banks; trees arched their branches over its clear waters, spreading their cool shade upon them; the white, sandy bottom and smooth, multicolored rocks shone through in the clearings, glistening in the gentle sun. By now the psychiatrist's office, the crowded sidewalk, and the bar had receded far into the background. So had the pain of her memories and the shame of her condition. Freedom, relief, and peace. The Sea of Tranquility itself could not hold a more otherworldly peace than Mill River.

A narrow, old, country bridge spanned the river. To the outside of the guardrail stood a small ledge just barely wide enough for someone Amanda's size to walk on. She wanted to gaze upon the flow of the water from the center of the bridge. Since the occasional car still passed by, Amanda stepped carefully from the side of the road onto the ledge. With her left hand on the guardrail, she inched her way towards the center. Each step brought her fresh exhilaration, as though she were weightlessly defying gravity.

At the center of the bridge, Amanda turned cautiously to face the river, holding on to the guardrail behind her with both hands. She gazed down. Was she dizzy from the drinks, her shortness of breath from the walk, or the height of the bridge?

In her lightheaded state, the river took on cosmic dimensions. Always changing, yet ever the same, it represented the river of life, with its myriad births and deaths, merging into the ocean of being. It symbolized the stream of time emptying into the sea of eternity. How Amanda longed to be one with that river. To leave behind her fleshly burden, to immerse herself in something infinitely greater, to lose herself in the whole.

She had decided to end her loneliness and depression but couldn't bear the ugly image of vomiting from an overdose of pills or reddening the bathtub water with blood from her slit wrists. What more beautiful place for her liberation than this idyllic spot? Nor could she face another night alone, another hopeless morning, another pointless day. What more perfect time for her deliverance than this moment of sublime serenity? A slight lean forward, and ultimate freedom would be hers. Amanda let go of the guardrail and teetered on the ledge.

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Just then Amanda heard a car pull up at the foot of the bridge. Turning her head, she saw two policemen step out of a squad car. The older one hurried forward. "Don't come any closer," she cried.

The officer stopped when he was a couple of yards onto the bridge. "Are you thinking of jumping?"

"Thinking? No. I've already decided. Don't try to stop me."

"I won't. Can we talk, though, just for five minutes? Then, if you still want to jump, you can."

“You won’t make me change my mind,” Amanda said. “What are you doing out here anyway? You aren’t writing parking tickets.”

“A passing motorist saw you on the ledge and called nine-one-one.”

“Well, maybe he needs your help. I don’t. Go find him.” Looking over her right shoulder, Amanda saw his eyes riveted on hers, though he stood ten yards away. He wasn’t moving.

“My name is Sal Retter,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Amanda. But you could have read that in the obituaries tomorrow.”

“Amanda, I’m thinking some terrible emotional pain has brought you to this point. Can you tell me about it?”

“So you can say you feel my pain?”

“I won’t pretend to know what you’re going through.” Sal slowly took a step forward. “But have you thought what your death would do to your family, Amanda?”

That was the second time he had called her by her name. “I don’t have any family. I was an only child, and my parents died in a car crash three years ago. I never married. In fact, I never even had a boyfriend. So I don’t have any children. I’m all alone.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Amanda.” The police always said that on TV, but he seemed to mean it. “What about your friends, though? How would they feel if you killed yourself?”

“I don’t have any friends.”

He paused. “Is there any cause you feel strongly about? Any issue that’s important to you?” He dared another step forward.

“Like saving the baby whales? Not really.” Amanda would have broken off the conversation, but it felt good to have a man take an interest in her.

“Isn’t there anything in life you enjoy? A hobby? A creative activity?”

“No. I just work a boring job crunching numbers, though I did save my company half a million last year.”

“So you are making a positive contribution somewhere.”

Amanda had never thought of it like that. “Yeah, I guess so, but data analysts are a dime a dozen. They could replace me anytime with anyone.”

“You must be very intelligent, yet you seem to think your life is meaningless,” Sal concluded, his eyes still fixed on hers.

“Well, ‘You’re nobody till somebody loves you.’ That’s my theme song.”

“Amanda, I want to tell you something personal about myself, but I don’t like talking to you from so far away. I’m going to come a little closer. So we can talk better.”

“Okay.”

He advanced a couple of yards. “Fifteen years ago I stood on this same bridge, just about where you are now, ready to do what you were going to do. I had just moved here for a new job and had found a house for my family to live in. My wife and two children, a seven-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son, were flying down to join me. The plane crashed. They didn’t survive.”

Did he say that to all the jumpers? Amanda could see his eyes moisten, though.

“I went on a drinking binge and lost my new job before I even started it. Death seemed like the only way out of my misery. I wanted to be with my wife and children again.”

“What happened?”

“A policeman tried to talk me down. I told him my life wasn’t worth living. He said it wouldn’t be until I made it worth living again. He did that by helping people, and eventually that’s what I did too.”

Amanda responded with silence, pondering his words.

“I guess what I’m saying, Amanda, is that you can wait your whole life for someone to come along and love you, and that person may never come. But that doesn’t make you a nobody. No, you can go out right now and start loving people who need love as much as you or even more so. It may not be exactly the kind of love you were looking for, but all love is good. And I have a feeling that you have a lot of love to share.”

“I think I do, but how would I do that?”

Sal took several steps closer. “Do you know how many orphaned children there are in this town who need someone to be a big brother or a big sister to them, how many victims of domestic abuse there are who need someone to confide in and to support them, how many sick people and shut-ins there are who have no one to visit them, how many elderly there are who have lost a spouse and whose children are too busy to see them, how many homeless persons there are who need someone to serve them a hot meal? There is no shortage of people to love.”

“And do you think they could love someone like me back?”

Sal moved within an arm’s distance of Amanda. “There’s only one way to find out. Won’t you give it a try? If it doesn’t work, this bridge will still be here a few months from now.”

He reached out his hand. Stunned, Amanda looked into his eyes, which had never left hers the whole time. Dare she take his hand?

Sal didn’t withdraw it, but waited. How could she refuse? At last Amanda reached out her hand, and Sal took hers in his. Slowly he started walking her back to safety.

God, it felt good to have a man hold her hand, even if just for a minute.

Four or five yards from the shore, Amanda, still feeling the effects of the drinks, lost her footing, broke her grip from Sal’s hand, and fell into the river. The moment she hit bottom, she

began thrashing with her arms and legs but could not raise herself to the surface. Panic seized her. When she was living, she wanted to die. Now that she was dying, she wanted more than anything to live. In her imagination, death had meant a peaceful release from suffering; in reality, it inflicted a terrifying agony. She was doomed.

The second after she fell, Sal jumped the railing and plunged feet first into the water. He swam behind Amanda, looped his arms under hers, grabbing her shoulders, and used his powerful thighs to push off the bottom. Although the river was no more than ten foot deep at this point, he barely managed to get both their heads above water for a quick gasp of air before Amanda's weight pulled them both back down. He could not possibly swim towing her to shore. The next time, Sal pushed off the bottom and backwards, coming up for air again and sinking to where the water was a foot less deep. After another four bobs, Sal had brought them to where they both could stand with their heads above water, the two of them coughing and panting.

"You saved my life," Amanda said and threw her arms around Sal's neck.

"But you're the one who decided to live," Sal said, patting her on the back.

"Yes," Amanda said. "Yes."

Sal led Amanda out of the water, and they trudged together, dripping wet, towards the squad car.

To Amanda's right the sun was starting to set, lengthening the shadows of the trees. It would rise again in the morning. Behind her the river continued to flow and would do so through the night and into the next day. Perhaps it would dry up someday, but it would never stop flowing of its own accord. Her life too would go on. Of course, she would die someday. Everyone did. But she would not end her life today. Tomorrow Amanda would reach out to someone else the way Sal had to her.

Glossary of Names

Amanda: nominative feminine singular gerundive of the Latin *amare* with various senses, one of which is “the one (yet) to be loved.”

Bristol: the site of the bridge (from the name of a city in England). Amanda Bristol realizes at the site of the bridge how she is to be loved.

Orvos: doctor (Hungarian)

Doug: short for Douglas = dark river (Scottish)

Lethe: the classical river of forgetfulness (Greek). Doug Lethe is a “dark river of forgetfulness” in that he can’t remember Amanda even after being told who she is.

Sal: short for “Salvatore,” which means “savior” (Italian)

Retter: rescuer (German). Sal Retter saves Amanda from suicide and rescues her from the bridge.