

## The Tomorrow Bridge.

The town of Tomorrow sounds like a late fifties, early sixties Real Estate promotional slogan, but Tomorrow is where I hail from, where I was born and raised. I spent the first sixteen years of my life in Tomorrow and now, some forty years later, I honestly can't see much in the way of change.

The main drag is still nothing but a dirt road, a dead end what with it leading on to the Tomorrow bridge, and to nowhere beyond. That's how it's always been, no one crosses Tomorrow bridge, not voluntarily, that's for damn sure.

Stories abound, handed down thru the generations to where they've blended in with the folklore. Mostly kids' stuff I'm prepared to wager, but there's so much belief in them there's a real fear and respect for what lies on the other side of the river.

My own folks warned me off the place, as did the folks of the other kids in Tomorrow. The explanation I was given, and something I've firmly believed to this day, quicksand, swamp and alligators, treacherous to anyone who cared to venture. It never dawned on me to question why anyone should build a bridge to span the river at that point, a fine bridge of treated timber, it must have cost a pretty penny at the time.

I'm driving a hire car on my return, back to my roots as they so often say, but I'm on something of a personal mission.

It's like stepping back in time. Ok, the cars are almost modern and many of the shop fronts look well maintained, recently painted. The same names appear above the doors for the most part and familiar smells waft on the early morning air.

Turning off the main drag, the first stand out difference is the empty lot where my old house once was, a flat square of wasteland. I parked the car on the spot like it was my birthright and walked up the path to Erik Strang's front door, we had been neighbours, close friends and neighbours. The man who answered the bell wasn't what I expected. Not an older version of Erik although I don't know what compelled me to think he might still live there, perhaps the fact that no one ever seemed to leave Tomorrow.

I fled Tomorrow, me and Liza, my old man's girlfriend since a couple of months after my old lady died of Tuberculosis when I was eleven. Liza had been what you would call a saloon girl, an occupation she took up after the sudden death of her husband, I didn't know him. She moved in and took to looking after me, me and my old man. When he couldn't find his bottle stash one day he blamed me for moving it and took a horse whip to me, flooring me with a rabbit punch before laying it on as thick as I'd ever known it, he was already drunk. Liza put herself between us and he set about her too, but Jed Strode, the deputy sheriff, pulled a gun on him before applying the cuffs. I had welts all over me but when Jed went to answer a radio call I gave my old man cause to remember me as Liza packed a suitcase. That's the last time I ever saw him, this is the first time since I ever gave him more than a passing thought. I didn't have time to say goodbye to Erik,

Liza bummed us a lift from a delivery man from the city and I swear she didn't look back, me either.

Ten seconds in the man's company and I knew him. Lorne Casey, younger brother of Nile, one of only two people to have quit Tomorrow by way of the bridge. Nile put the preacher's daughter in the family way, the preacher came to his name after flaying all the skin from her back. Armed with his scattergun, he came in search of Nile, who in turn had been warned by a friend. Afraid to take the most favoured route out of Tomorrow, Nile shouldered his knapsack and fled across the Tomorrow bridge. The preacher followed him to halfway and tried to pepper him with shot, but Nile reached the far end unscathed. The preacher hunkered down and waited for his return, aware of the stories, aware of the fact that no one ever dared to cross the Tomorrow bridge. At daybreak he gave it up and returned home, sure in the knowledge that Nile was long gone.

Lorne told me Erik had moved to the city for his job, he was head of English Lit at the college. Somehow, I wasn't surprised, it was easily his best subject at school. The saloon had rooms upstairs but I had to go round back to gain entry. Who's sitting behind the little desk but Mush Elgar, I knew him straight off, that had always been his smile.

When I left Tomorrow, Mush wouldn't have been allowed anywhere near the saloon what with him being black and all. It was good to see Tomorrow had moved with the times, I'd never agreed with all that colour bar business but there were those who upheld it to the letter back in the day. Mush was also a friend and took secret reading and writing lessons from myself and Erik. We ran together, fished the river together, swam under the Tomorrow bridge for dares and generally enjoyed each other's company. It stopped when Mush's old lady, the laundry woman, warned him of what might befall if folks saw we were getting too pally; too bad.

It took Mush a few moments to place me. Then he was round the jump with that big smile and hugging me to him, genuinely pleased to see me after all the years, and me him.

I took a room, Mush told his boss he was done for the day, brought a cold six pack and we sat chewing the fat on the veranda. He said I'd lost my Southern drawl, most of it, I said his was as I remembered. He didn't ask what brought me back and I didn't offer. Instead, he gave me a potted history of Tomorrow to where I found I didn't hold much of an affinity towards it.

I told Mush I planned to visit with Erik and invited him along, but he had work, he thanked me anyway.

Later that evening I walked to the Tomorrow bridge, finding it in surprisingly good repair. Looking towards the far bank I saw the dense mangrove, pretty much all that ever could be seen, that and the equally dense cloud of Skeeters which added to the all round foreboding atmosphere of the place. Warm as the evening was, I shivered.

On my return to the saloon I noticed the old hitching post was still in place. That brought back the memory of the only other person to have crossed the bridge in my lifetime, Old Jack Blade.

Old Jack was something of a handyman and while it was reported he was the

richest man in Tomorrow, he tended to live frugally. He would ride his old horse to the saloon, take on a load and let the horse carry him home. On the day in question, some kids fed his horse with clumps of Loco weed; they didn't know what it was and neither did the horse. The weed only served to put the animal into a sleep but when Jack fell out of the bar and mounted up, the Loco side of it seemed to kick in. Jack held on for dear life as his mount careered across the Tomorrow bridge like someone was after his tail and no one saw either of them ever again.

Mush joined me on the veranda for a nightcap and I told him of my life since leaving Tomorrow. Liza took up with yet another drunk and I found myself volunteering for the marines. I learned a trade, welding, and jumped from planes for five years, jumped into some exotic locations, at least they could have been if people weren't shooting at me. After that I had the travel bug and worked on offshore pipelines. Mush couldn't believe I welded underwater, couldn't grasp the concept at all. That ended when they pulled me up too fast and I got the bends. To be fair I played it up, hammered them for compensation and full pension rights. I buried my second wife soon after that which meant I got to spend the money at my own speed. Since then I worked for a newspaper, a roving reporter of sorts, war zones and such until my early retirement last week.

I lay awake listening to the crickets and pondering my next move, my reason for returning to Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, I'll visit with Erik and invite him along for the trip. The day after tomorrow, whether he wants to tag along or not, I'll be crossing the Tomorrow bridge, something compels me to do so, something harking back to when Erik and I would bid each other goodnight and say, 'Tomorrow, we cross the Tomorrow bridge, and to Hell with the consequences.'

Let me say it straight. I don't have a death wish, nor do I have a terminal illness. I've faced death head on a few times and I don't fear it. I have survival skills, jungle experience others could only aspire to but I also have an itch which just has to be scratched, a lifelong itch.