

Dockside Conversation

by

Seth Feierstein

I should have been on my way to the 8 o'clock meeting with my manager, Mr. Shuller and the board of directors. The company heads wanted to discuss 3rd quarter earnings, and I had to explain why the company was in the red. Instead I found myself standing on a dock in a massive cavern. A dense fog surrounded me. It came in waves; milky tendrils flowing all about. The air was cold and wet; at times I could see my breath. Water lapped against the cream colored beach that spread out from the dock. The sand glimmered as if stars had settled into it. Beyond the beach, through the haze, a stairway hewn from dark granite spiraled up and away, and at its top was a pinpoint of light. The entrance to the cavern, I supposed.

The cold from the dock's clammy wood seeped into my bare feet. I shifted my weight from foot to foot. Water worn and slick with algae, some of the dock's planks were rotting, and instead of brown, the wood was green and gray. I took my time walking to its end, avoiding planks that looked like they couldn't support my weight.

At the dock's edge, I knelt down and looked into the water. I could not see into its depths, but with what light was available, I saw my reflection. My skin was pale, sagging, and wrinkled: A glaze covered my eyes. I looked like an old man. But I wasn't old, I was twenty-eight. I fingered my face grabbing chunks of cheek, wiping my hands over my forehead and chin, feeling for any sign that my reflection told the truth. But my face was smooth, as if I had just shaved. My reflection mimicked my frantic motions. I reached out to break the lie it told, but stopped when I saw two other sullen and wrinkly

faces in the water. They hovered just below the surface on either side of my reflection.

One of them reached up, its leathery arm breaking the calm, and tried to touch me. I

jerked away, backpedaled, and fell onto the slime-covered dock.

My breath came in ragged gasps and my heart raced. Each thump-thump vibrated through my body. I paused before getting back up, allowing my heart to settle. On hands and knees I edged my way back and again peered over the dock. The faces had disappeared, and my reflection, showing my true age, stared back at me. “Where am I?” I asked. My hoarse voice sounded unfamiliar, like two rocks grinding together. My face flushed, and sweat trickled down my forehead. I looked around for a way out of the cavern. I fidgeted with my shirt, a nervous habit started long ago. While tugging at my shirt I debated whether or not to make my escape from this strange place by climbing the spiraling stairs.

Decision made, I surged towards the beach. Not as cautious as when I first walked down the dock I stepped on a rotten plank that could barely support its own weight let alone my own. When I heard the loud crack I knew I was in trouble. The plank gave way, fell into the murky water, and I fell with it. I almost slipped through the space where the plank once was, but was able to keep myself from falling when I caught hold of another plank’s jutting edge. I grunted and frantically kicked my legs. I used all the strength in my arms and shoulders to raise myself up. I lay on the cold dock; the dampness seeped through my shirt, but I didn’t care. As I caught my breath, I closed my eyes and listened to the lapping waves. I repeated my question, “Where am I?” Minutes passed before a response floated over the water:

“What does God say?”

I sat up. As I pondered this “answer” I heard creaking wood and a repetitive splash. A ball of light emerged from the darkness, and as it came closer I saw it was an oil lamp on a pole attached to the stern of a boat gliding across the water. A robed figure, with a long pole in his hands, propelled the small craft.

“Here, be useful,” the boatman said, upon reaching the dock. He tossed a large rope at me. I caught the rope and looped it around one of the moorings. The boat was really nothing more than a small skiff, large enough for two, maybe three, people. The boatman appraised my knot. Seemingly satisfied, he reached into his black robe and pulled out a cigar and match. He lit the cigar and began puffing away. The smoke smelled sweet, but dry, like burning rose petals.

Several puffs passed before the boatman looked at me. I couldn’t be certain if he was really looking at me as his hood left his face in shadow. All I could see was a cigar protruding from a wall of black, and even its orange glow did little to illuminate his features. “Ah. There’s nothing like a good cigar, especially after crossing that river. The current is a tough mother.”

My voice popped and screeched, “Where am I?”

“Didn’t you hear my answer?” he replied.

“‘What does God say?’ That isn’t an answer, that’s a riddle!”

“A riddle?” His cigar bobbed up and down as he spoke. “Listen kid, it’s an answer, but maybe you just ain’t ready for it. Maybe it’s too ‘deep’ for you.” The boatman brought his hand up to his chin. His sleeve slipped down his arm, revealing pallid skin covered with strange tatoos. “Hmm, ok how about this for an answer: You are here,” he said triumphantly.

“What kind of an answer is that?” I paced across the width of the dock; my bare feet padded along the wet wood, and the planks creaked under my weight.

The boatman lifted his cigar out of his mouth and tapped it on the side of the boat; ash gently floated to the water, mixing with the dark liquid. After clearing his throat of what sounded like the most viscous phlegm, he answered me, or rather; I thought he was going to answer me. “Ok then. You are on a dock by the river within a cavern. As to how you got here, that ain’t my department.”

I flung my hands into the air and began yelling, “What the . . .”

“Hell?” He finished for me. “Nope, not Hell kid, that has yet to be decided.”