

Happiness

ROBERT LUMSDEN*

He had been sitting beside the bridge for two days when the second motorbike rider joined him. It was one of the new Hondas, a more splendid machine than his heavily-laden 99cc glorified motor scooter. He hardly glanced above the newcomer's boots as he approached and stood beside him, watching with him the raging torrent a thousand feet below. The newcomer – who introduced himself as 'Abe' – whistled between his teeth.

'We got to go across *that*?'

'Either that, or turn back.'

They looked at the bridge stretching a hundred and fifty metres across the gorge. Made of rope with a 'floor' of wooden slats set at six-centimetre intervals – he had measured the distance between the first two slats, and it was exactly six centimeters – the bridge was slippery with spray carried from the rapids far beneath by strong updraughts.

'How safe is it?' Abe asked.

'You can see for yourself. How safe does it look?'

'Rocks about a bit, doesn't it? Sways in the wind.'

'I'm pretty sure some of the ropes are frayed,' the old hand said, 'Some of them near the middle.'

'Jesus.'

'I could point them out to you, if you like.'

'I'd rather not know.'

They were silent awhile, listening to the roar of the river rise to them along the canyon walls. At length, Abe said:

'What are we going to do?'

The old hand turned to look at him then full in the face for the first time, although he still didn't get to his feet.

'We could go back,' he said.

'Hell, no! I've ridden a hundred clicks over bad roads to get here. There's got to be another way.'

'We could make up our minds to go across.'

They were silent awhile, sharing this prospect like a grim sacrament.

'What would be the best way?' Abe asked. 'How would you do it? Take a run at it, fast as you can, or slow as possible, inch by inch?'

'I've been sitting here for two days, trying to decide.'

Abe got up and walked a few yards back towards his motorbike, then returned.

'This is impossible,' he said.

'There is a third option.'

'OK. What?'

'We could sit here till a fourth option presents itself.'

'Wait for something to happen while your life ebbs away?' Abe stretched out an arm and swept it about him so it included the road behind and the cliffs opposite. 'Nothing ever

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happens up here, does it? You can see that.'

The old hand agreed, but he thought: why can't I just sit here while time runs out, watching the sun rise and set, feeling the days expire through me? I could pick up the odd scrap of food from passersby – those crazy enough or with nerve enough to attempt the crossing, and those who come here to turn back. What would be so wrong with that? Would it be such a crime?

'Who could be happy doing that?' Abe asked. 'Just waiting? You'd have to make a move, one way or another.' He paused, searching for something conclusive. 'To be a man,' he said, 'You'd have to.'

I could point out to him, the old hand thought, how something is always regretted, even by men who are so eager to get up and go. You might even say that the measure of a man's success is how much those who know him feel that his going leaves something undone, an absence he might have completed, with conversation perhaps, or an unexpected joke, or a memorable gesture to fill out an arid afternoon. None of that can happen once he's decided, finally, to go. By simply staying put, those absences might be taken care of. The lovely gesture remains possible. Just by remaining as one is, one meets the mark.

The old hand looked down at the valley floor; something he did not often do.

If I cross that bridge and it breaks and I fall to my death on the rocks below, he thought, my friends' incompletenesses are established forever.

'I'm happy here,' he said.

'That's bullshit,' Abe said. He walked around impatiently, wiping the palms of his hands on the fronts of his jeans. 'You want to know what happiness is? I'll tell you. Happiness is deciding how to go across that bloody bridge, and doing it. That's it. No great mystery. It's not even getting to where you want to go. It's just having a shot at getting there. It's coming in sight of arriving.'

He walked away, then came back.

'That's happiness,' he said.

They squatted together then, watching the sun begin to set over the cliff opposite.

'Tell you what,' Abe said. 'We'll start early tomorrow morning. Who'll go first?'

The old hand thought of suggesting they draw lots, but decided that was too Greek for his liking; too classical.

'The first to have his kit packed and ready, goes first,' Abe said. 'First to greet the day has the honour.'

Agreeing, the old hand was already envisaging the possibility of sleeping late the following morning, then lying abed even longer. He would not have been surprised to find himself still tucked up in his sleeping bag at noon.