

## Downstream Current

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*Laurel Dewey*

Morgan Shoop stood in the doorway. His eyes rested intently on his eleven-year-old son, Will. Morgan sunk his long hands into his trouser pockets and wedged his shoulder against the wood frame. His head tilted and touched the wood, but his eyes never left the boy. Morgan had not known how long he had been standing there—perhaps an hour, perhaps a few minutes. All he knew was that his thoughts were still. No matter how hard he tried to think about the cattle prices for next year, or the odds against another unrelenting winter, his mind always returned to the one thing he could not forget.

Morgan Shoop was dying. He hadn't told anyone yet—not even his wife, Alice. On the following Tuesday, he would have known for three weeks exactly. Three weeks and not one word. The stooped shoulders, the sudden weight loss, the sunken chest, the eyes that saw no future, all told what his voice could not bear to hear. He didn't have long—maybe six months if he took it easy. But since Morgan didn't know how to take it easy, he figured he wasn't long for this world.

His son, Will, lay sleeping—peacefully, unaware that life ever came to an end. Morgan thought back to when he was Will's age and how the days blended into each other. Back then, life was just one long day, with periods of night only serving to interrupt the perfect rhythm. Back then, only old people died. People who, when you heard of their passing, seemed dead long before their souls surrendered. Death was accepted and expected then. And then Morgan would try to remember something different, but once again, he could not.

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His worry had taken him through the house that night. From room to room he would wander, each time trying to make that decision. And each time he thought he knew the answer, he would suddenly forget and wander into another room, only to find himself more confused.

So he stood in the boy's doorway and calculated he had stood there the longest without forgetting and without confusion. He lifted his shoulder from the door frame and, keeping his hands deep into his trouser pockets, he approached the boy. His tall, lean body towered over the boy's small figure. With his knee, he struck the side of the bed.

"You, boy," he muttered.

Will did not stir.

"You boy!" Morgan repeated, this time with more determination.

Will turned over and faced his father, his eyes opening only long enough to spot Morgan's figure. "What?" Will whispered, barely able to speak.

"Get your clothes on. Put on your jacket. It's cold."

Morgan turned and struck a match to the lamp. Once lit, Morgan could see that the lamp had barely enough oil in it for another day's work. He turned to the boy and held the lamp to his face. The boy stirred uncomfortably as the warmth from the lamp seeped into his cheek.

"Come on," coaxed Morgan as he turned down the bed covers.

Will knew there was no getting out of this. He couldn't reach down for the bed covers, for his father had a firm hold on them. He couldn't turn away for the cold would awaken his body, giving him no choice but to get up and move. Gradually, Will sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes.

Morgan threw an extra pair of long underwear toward Will. He pulled out an old pair of overalls, a flannel shirt, and his fishing sweater, tattered at the edges from too many fish hooks getting in the way of the wool.

Will pulled the warm underwear on and turned toward the window. It was still dark. "What time is it?" the boy whispered.

"Don't know," came the reply. "Don't forget to tuck your trousers into your boots."

“Where are we going?” Will asked, but his father was gone.

Morgan walked into the dark morning, pulling his heavy overcoat close to his body. He let out a low yawn and his breath fogged into the cold air. He snuck a look back toward the house and wished that Will would hurry and join him.

The valley, clenched in the last hour of darkness before sunrise, held a mushroom of dense fog in its center. Morgan had known many a morning when he had ventured into such a fog and lost his direction. He would panic and his stomach would swell in fear as he would try to move toward the nearest opening of light, always afraid that he would never find his way out of the fog. Once he reached the light, though, he always discovered to his never-ending delight that he was not that far away from where he had started.

Will came from the house, carefully closing the kitchen door so that it wouldn't bang shut. He crossed to his father, wrapping his coat tightly against his body and cupping his hands to his mouth to warm them.

“Where are your gloves?” Morgan asked.

“Wore the fingertips out. Mom said she'd get me a new pair.”

Morgan felt inside of his overcoat pocket and pulled out a pair of thick gloves. “Here. You put these on. Push your fingers up as far as you can into the glove. They'll be loose but at least they'll keep you warm.”

Will slipped the fur-lined gloves onto his small hands. He moved his fingers around and brushed the soft fur up and down the side of his finger. “One day, I'm gonna get myself a pair just like this,” Will said as he and his father crossed to the truck.

Morgan glanced at the gloves and then at Will. “You can grow into those.”

The old flatbed truck was covered with heavy droplets from the evening dew. As Morgan passed the hood, he took a long swipe with the palm of his hand and brushed a thin stream of water onto the ground. He did the same with the front window, this time wiping the dew off with quick flicks of his wrist.

Will got into the truck first and quickly closed the door, trying not to let any of the cool morning seep into the front seat. Morgan started the engine. The engine sputtered and started to die but Morgan pushed down on the accelerator, again and again until the

engine idled without hesitation. Morgan stared straight ahead, his eyes canvassing the great expanse of territory that lay before the burgeoning fog. His eyes became fixed on the land and not one muscle moved.

Will turned to his father and waited. The boy looked into the flatbed. "You forgot the poles," Will said, starting out of the truck to retrieve them.

"We're not going fishing," came the reply.

Will sat back in his seat and stared into the darkness. He longed to be back in his bed where it was warm and safe. Will hesitated and then asked, "Where are we going?"

Morgan slid out of his daze and took his foot off the clutch. The truck eased forward. "Ned Begley said that the North Bridge split apart. I figured we'd better take a look at it."

Will sat up when his father said the word "we." The boy liked the sound of the word, especially when the "we" was him and his father.

Morgan curled the truck around the gravel curves until he reached the main gate. Closed each evening at dusk and opened each morning at sunrise, the wooden gate stood as a kind of signpost that almost said, "YOU ARE NOW ARRIVING AT THE RANCH OF MORGAN SHOOP." It was his gate. Morgan had built it and every beam, nail, peg and hinge was there because Morgan Shoop had chosen to put it there. It stood as a sort of testament that Morgan Shoop had lived and built a gate that had withstood the fiercest storms and a multitude of freak accidents. Deep down inside, Morgan liked to believe that it would always be there.

Will started out of the truck to open the gate when Morgan's arm gently set him back into his seat. Morgan set the brake as he got out of the truck and lifted the long wooden plank that held the gate closed at night. He swung the gate away from him and then secured the side with a piece of rope which he wrapped around the nearest post. Morgan took a few steps toward the truck and then stopped.

"You slide on over and bring her through!" Morgan called to Will.

Will stuck his head out of his window, "You kidding?"

"Go on and slide on over! Put your foot on the clutch, take off

the brake and then ease her on down here.”

“But I don’t—”

“Go on, now! I ain’t got all day for you to think on it! You’ve seen me do it enough times, so go on!”

Will reluctantly slid over and positioned himself in the driver’s seat. His left foot just reached the clutch as he struggled to keep his head above the dashboard. With his right hand, he reached over and slowly depressed the button on the brake handle and eased the handle down until he couldn’t push it any further. Trying to be as careful as he could, he lifted his foot off the clutch. Suddenly, the truck lurched forward. His foot fell to the accelerator and the truck raced forward.

Seeing it coming, Morgan pressed his body against the gate. “The brake! Push on the brake!!!” Morgan yelled as the truck jerked passed him.

Hearing his father’s call, Will immediately pushed his foot onto the brake and brought the truck to a deadening halt. Morgan padded over to the truck and opened the driver’s door.

He got in the truck as Will moved to the other seat. “A little rough, but at least you didn’t stall,” Morgan said, closing his door tightly behind him. “From now on, you’ll be in charge of driving her through the gate.”

“Yeah?” Will said, feeling as though a great honor had been bestowed upon him.

“Yeah,” came the reply and Morgan set the truck into gear.

The first signs of light were still more than half an hour away as the truck made its way down the dirt road. The truck headlights seemed to absorb the dampness and hold it within its elongated beams. Twice the billowing fog obstructed Morgan’s view and twice the fog cleared, leading Morgan each time toward the next opening in the fog.

The headlights skimmed across the fence posts that lined Morgan’s portion of land. Each post stood straight, strong and impenetrable. A thin coil of barbed wire was neatly entwined at the same height on every post and secured every second post with a bright red nail. Morgan slowed the truck to a halt and put it in reverse. Using his headlights as his only source of light, he surveyed the fence until he came to a stop. He turned off the ignition and set the brake. He shook his head as he folded his arms atop the

steering wheel.

"Looks like she's at it again!" Morgan said with a sing-song quality to his voice.

He got out of the truck, leaving the headlights on and pointed toward the fence. Will joined his father.

The damage was apparent only to Morgan's well-trained eye. One of the posts had been pushed from its base and was leaning precariously against the coil of barbed wire. Morgan got down on his haunches and surveyed the damage. Will matched his father's posture and tried to appear as adult as he could when he spoke.

"Lucy must be fired up about something!" Will said, as he pushed his hand against the fallen post.

"She's due in the spring. I don't think she's too set on it, though." Morgan slid his hand up and down the post, as he peered into the darkness in search of Lucy.

"Don't she want it?" Will asked.

"She wants it. She just wants it right now, that's all." Morgan pushed the post until it stood upright. With one tremendous pull, he uprooted the post from its base and set it on the damp ground. "Dig down a little deeper."

Will proceeded to dig the dirt out of the hole. One of his gloves almost slid off but he forced his fingers deeper into the glove's fingertips until they became secure. Once he was finished, he stood up, brushed the dirt off the gloves and stood aside. Morgan tilted the post toward Will. "What?" Will asked.

"You ain't finished. You got a hole and no post. Go on."

Will took the post from his father and looked at it as though it were foreign to him. He pushed the post into the hole and looked up at his father.

"That ain't gonna hold," Morgan said quietly. "You gotta push it harder and pack the dirt around the bottom. Go on."

Will looked at the post and then back to his father. "I ain't strong enough."

"You're strong enough. Now, go on!"

Will continued to push and pack the dirt around the bottom of the post, but every time he tried to let the post stand on its own, it would collapse. Will's frustration mounted. Morgan's figure loomed over the struggling boy, without movement or a word. The boy stopped and spoke into the ground. "I can't do this

alone.”

Morgan reached into the inside of his overcoat and brought out his hunting knife. The outer casing was clean ivory with one mahogany peg at each end of the knife. Given to Morgan by an old Sioux Indian on his deathbed more than twenty years ago, the knife had nary a nick or scratch on its surface. It was as tough and unyielding as the men who owned it. It was always there and always seemed to remedy the situation, whether the situation was cutting enough rope for a horse’s halter or trimming the fat from a side of beef. Morgan pointed the handle toward Will. “Pack the dirt in more. Then make a couple of new niches for the wire to set into. It’ll stand straight.”

The boy took the knife. Even through his thick gloves he could feel the smooth texture of the ivory. He flicked the handle and the knife sprang from its case. Working rapidly, Will packed the dirt around the stump as much as he could, then carefully carved two deep crevices into the side of the post. With one hand holding the post, the other moved the wire around the post and into the crevices. Once more around and the wire was secured and then fastened with the little red nail that marked the post. Will stood back and gave the post a slight kick. The post did not move. Will smiled and proudly stood straight as he looked at his father. Morgan nodded and turned toward the truck.

“Hey, don’t forget your knife,” Will said as he tried to slip the knife into his father’s coat pocket.

Morgan continued toward the truck. “Don’t need it.”

The two got in the truck. Will looked at his father in question. “What do you mean?”

“You keep it. You can use it now.” Morgan started the ignition and released the brake.

Will looked down at the knife. It seemed far too big to belong to him—his father’s name seemed to still be carved upon its casing. He placed the knife in his coat pocket and sat in silence.

“You’re gonna be there when Lucy throws her foal.” Morgan said with an outpouring of determination. “From the looks of her, there’s gonna be a whole lot of kicking and a whole helluva lot of hollering, but you’re gonna be there and make sure she don’t holler and kick too much.”

Will looked confused. “But I don’t know nothing about—”

Morgan set the truck into gear and revved the engine. "Better get on down to that bridge before too long."

Will didn't try to finish his sentence. Suddenly, an uneasy feeling came over the boy. Something was uneven in the air. The morning light was just beginning to break into the darkened sky. The peacefulness of the darkness was gradually being taken over by the shallow light of another day. Will finally decided that this was the reason for the uproar in the atmosphere. Yet, the more the morning broke through, the more the boy doubted that such a light could be the cause of such confusion. As each hill became brighter and every color was released from darkness, the morning seemed to become a welcoming presence and not a menace.

By the time the truck reached the North Bridge, the sun had cleared the lower hills and the whole valley was filling with light. Along the banks of the river, a bevy of yellow and white wildflowers sprung to life as the sun opened each bud. The valley had just gone through three straight days and nights of heavy rain. The downpours had left the ground around the river saturated to a point of a swampy consistency. Will had learned from experience that one never ventured into the mushy banks until the earth had time to dry and harden. Once, Will had forged ahead through the mud without thinking and his heavy boots had become locked into a bed of mush. Only with the help of his father was he rescued from the swamp.

More terrifying, though, than the mud were the surging waters that dug their trail into the river bed. The week's storm had stirred the waters into a frenzied pace that cut and gorged the sides of the riverwall. The crashing sound of the water, hitting large rocks mixed with the loud hiss that erupted every time the current slapped the riverwall, sent shivers of fear through Will's body. This uncontrollable part of nature disturbed the boy for it was larger than anything he knew.

The North Bridge, named only because it lay to the north of the Shoop ranch, was merely a forty foot suspension bridge that connected one bank of land to another. The rising waters had torn several of the center planks from their foundations, and the rope, which held these planks together, had been scraped by the loose planks until only a few threads of rope were supporting the center of the bridge.



Morgan stood in silence and surveyed the damage to the bridge. Will tried to appear as casual as he could, but the threatening sounds of the current forced him to move back a few steps. Once Morgan's mind had sorted out the problem and figured out a solution, he moved to the truck and pulled out a long piece of thick rope. He returned to the banks and gathered the rope into a loose circular formation. He spoke to Will, not as a child, but as a fellow comrade. "I figure that if a body could slide down to the center where it's split and secure this rope between the planks, it might just hold till we could get a crew up here."

"Yeah," said Will in agreement, and he nodded toward the bridge.

Morgan ran the rope between his long fingers. He paused and then swung the entire circle of rope toward Will. "There you go," said Morgan.

Will caught the rope before it swung away from him. He stood looking at his father and then looking toward the river. He turned to his father, his mouth dropped at half-mast and he tried to speak but the words became stuck on their way out. "What . . . I . . . I thought . . . I . . ." Will threw down the rope and stepped back as if the rope were a snake, coiled to attack. He shook his head in defiance. "*No! Not me!*"

"Pick up the rope," said Morgan, an undertone of anger lining his speech.

"No!" said Will as he stepped back a few more paces.

Morgan's tone was becoming increasingly strained as he moved toward the boy. "Bridges don't mend by themselves, boy! Now pick up the rope!!!"

"I never done it before! I don't know nothing about it! I could get killed out there!"

This hit Morgan the hardest. He stopped and his eyes studied the mucky banks. He caught his breath and pinned his eyes firmly upon the boy. "You're *not* gonna get killed."

There was such conviction in Morgan's voice that the boy felt as if God had just spoken to him. Will gathered the rope into his hands and approached the bank.

He positioned his feet on several scattered patches of green grass that sprouted a temporary plateau within the muddy banks. He had to move quickly, though, for his weight could easily push the

plateaus into the swamp. He grabbed hold of a tree trunk that grew precariously between the edge of the bank and the flowing water. He leaned against the tree and slung the circle of rope around his neck, leaving his hands free to support his body. He hesitated and looked back at his father who had not moved since he had given his son the order. Will turned toward the bridge and, holding onto a low branch, worked his way down the side of the riverwall.

The water rushed directly below his hanging feet. Each time he reached up to get a better grasp on the branch, he could feel the current brush up against the tips of his boots. Will kept his head looking straight ahead, never once letting his eyes hit the rushing water. His heart beat so fast and so loudly that he feared it would fall out of his chest. Once he got within a foot of the bridge, he swung his left foot forward and caught his heel on the topside of a plank. When he felt secure, he did the same with his right foot. He moved his hands down the branch until he could feel the sharp tip. With his right hand, he reached forward and grabbed onto the bridge's roped side. He took a breath and quickly grabbed another piece of the rope with his left hand.

There he stayed for a moment, perched upon the edge of the bridge like a bird before flight. Only then did he look down below at the rushing current. The cool spray rose up and skimmed the seat of his pants. He turned away from the water and maneuvered his way onto the bridge until he lay flat on his stomach with his head toward the center split.

Plank by plank, he moved his way up toward the center of the bridge. Every now and then a gush of wind would sweep down the center of the river, sending the bridge into a rhythmic swaying motion. At those points, Will would lay perfectly still until the bridge stopped wobbling.

Will reached the center and removed the circle of rope from around his neck. With one hand holding a firm plank, he used the other hand to straighten out the rope. He tried to toss the rope ahead of him to get it in between one of the planks on the opposite side of the split, but each time he would overshoot his mark and have to draw the rope back toward him. He wanted to cry out for help but he knew there would be none given.

After the fifth attempt, Will became impatient. His fear of this roaring monster turned into a slow anger that just wanted to get the job done and get off the bridge. With his impatience keyed, he drew the rope back to him and, using the bridge's roped side, he worked his way up until he stood upright on a wide plank. Suddenly, a loud crash erupted and Will jerked his body around. The bridge swayed and in one sweep he flipped over the side of the bridge. He yelled as the current pushed him under with all the force it could muster. He grabbed for the bridge plank but his oversized gloves hindered his hold.

Morgan approached the bank and straddled the marshy center. "Let them go, boy!"

Will's head peeked out of the water and he turned to his father. He couldn't yell or cry. All of his emotion was trapped in his hands as he fought to hold onto the plank.

Morgan's bellowing voice echoed once again through the river canyon. "Let them go! *Lose them!!!*"

Will shook his right hand and the glove slipped off, falling into the water. Then came the left glove and it too washed into oblivion. His hold on the plank was stronger and he managed to fit the end of his rope between his teeth. He hung there, unable to move his legs up onto the bridge but too frightened to let go.

Morgan balanced his body against the same tree trunk from where Will had started his journey, and called to his son. "Will! Your knife! Use your knife!"

Will turned to his father, not understanding what was meant.

"Cut your rope in half! You can get it in between the planks from down there if you cut the slack!" And then with a burst of impatience. "Go on, boy!!!"

Will carefully let his left hand leave the plank momentarily as he quickly pulled out the ivory-cased knife from his coat pocket. With the knife in hand, he grabbed for the plank just as a wave of water slapped against his back, causing the bridge to sway uncontrollably.

"Cut it now!" Morgan yelled.

With the rope still secured between his teeth, Will pulled it away from him, stopping only to get a better hold on the plank. Once he had a large enough portion, he flicked the knife open and brought

it down toward his mouth. The current rose and tried to force him down but he lifted his body with the wave and was able to get his right elbow upon the bridge. Once secure, he quickly went to work and moved the knife back and forth through the rope until the slack dropped into the water and washed downstream. With his left hand, he swung the portion of rope up and onto the bridge and over the center split plank. Enough rope was left dangling over the plank so that he was able to bring the end toward him with his left foot. He grabbed hold of the two ends and moved the center planks together.

He started to tie a knot when the knife began to slip from between his fingers. The knife dropped and Will watched the mahogany pegs slide past his thumb. Without a moment's hesitation, he flicked his wrist and caught the knife before the current could steal it. He plopped the knife into his coat pocket and then tied four tight repetitive knots, ending each one with a quick tug to ensure its hold.

Will reached behind him and grabbed onto the tree branch. Working backwards, he moved his watersoaked body toward the banks. Morgan moved around the tree trunk and caught Will as he reached the banks.

Will grabbed a hold of Morgan and hung onto his thick overcoat. His breathing was labored and his head ached. His heart had slowed but each beat was a throbbing pound inside his chest. The boy brushed his forehead against his father's coat, then looked up into his father's eyes. Morgan held his son tight to his body but kept his eyes on the downstream current. And for the first time, the sun crested in the distant waters.