

"Red Beret" Excerpt

by Tim G. Young

I was thinking that come February I would close out of the Four Queens and drive my Mercedes back to Pennsylvania. While I was thinking that February came and went. March. I suppose all back in Pennsylvania by now might have considered me dead. True there had been no notices in any papers about my death but who really knew?

I crossed the river Styx. I had two coins for my eyes. When I arrived on the other side I saw Johnny Depp, Neil Young and Jim Morrison. Depp and Young were waiting for the boat to take them back. Morrison had already built himself a little lean-to and was gathering wood of different sizes and shapes to make a fire. He looked old and ragged except for a shine far in his eyes that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I had to tell the other two that I didn't wasn't sure there was a boat that carried you back to the opposite shore but they were confident, looked at me funny, and even possessed coins for their return voyage. I had to ask Neil if they were not really dead then what were they doing here in the first place. Young said they were the travelers, the wanderers, that fearless breed that would make a trek no matter where it led. Depp said that knowledge was everything and that crossing the river Styx had shown him the true meaning of life. I asked him what that might be but instead of an answer he just kept his eyes trained on the other side looking and looking for the boat that would return him to life. Of course I was going to want to get back too but I had an idea on how to do that and I wasn't going to mention it to anyone because I wasn't sure it was going to work for number one and for number two if it did work I wasn't sure it would take any more than one person and that one person did most certainly need to be me.

I walked over to Jim's improvised shelter and asked him if he'd mind some company. "Hell no," he said, "everybody has been avoiding me here like I was the fucking plague or something. Come on over and rest those bones." I was surprised myself that he was such a welcoming host, I guess it was because he looked like a mean old mountain man who had seen it all and just wanted to be alone but that was not the case. After we sat a spell and he had got that fire going like a miniature pyre, I began to develop a big hunger. "Is there anything to eat in a place such as this, Jim?" He said, "Are you kidding? Right behind me not ten yards from here are piles of fresh dead rabbits and squirrels. Why dontcha go back there and pick out some nice plump ones so we can cook 'em up right here." I went over there. I couldn't believe my eyes. There were a bunch of people, some women too, that were all dressed more or less like Morrison and they were all picking through the dead game like people look at fruit at an outdoor market. I joined the 'shoppers' and loaded my arms with the warm bodies of these creatures. Jim looked real pleased when I came back with such a load. He was so nice. He said, "Now you sit down and take a load off while I prepare our supper." Without another word he expertly skinned and gutted those critters as quickly as the finest butcher could have done. In no time he had them on a spit, three or four at a time and the aroma from all that fresh flesh crackling under fire filled the air and I noticed we both had to wipe the saliva from running down our chins with our shirt sleeves.

We sat and ate and talked deep into the night. The food not only tasted like nirvana but lifted our spirits and gave us strength. We didn't get tired all night. Later we saw the other fires and heard the wood crack and the low rumble of other conversations. I glanced down to the water's edge and could see that Depp and Young were still waiting there. Another boat had not come since the one I had been on. I asked Jim if I shouldn't go down there and see if they might want something to eat or share our fire but he said that

wouldn't do any good because they had their mindset and so the only thing they could focus on was to cross that stream. "Besides," he said, "if they really want something, they know where I am." I think shortly after that we fell asleep, or at least I did. I awoke in a few hours and the day was just beginning to brighten. The smoke from our fire twisted on itself and raised lazily upwards. I wiped my eyes and looking down to the river saw that Johnny and Neil were gone. For some reason I got up and strolled over to where they had been sitting the night before. They had left some impressions in the mud. The tracks of their boots and how they had been sitting down. I noticed a few little sticks that they might have been fooling with while they waited. Then I saw that it was actually an arrow and that it was pointing across the river to the other shore. I gazed over there and saw nothing but thick scrub growth that grew from the edge of the river back on up several yards on to the shore. I was just about to turn away when I caught a bit of movement from in the scrub. There was a boat tied up in there the color of the scrub which was varying shades of grey and brown. "Well, " I said.

I walked back up to Jim's spot and he was already busy roasting this mornings breakfast. "So, it looks like they made it out of here. Good. That's what they wanted."

"Yeah, like you said, they kept their eyes on the prize."

"Not a bad line. Say, what's your name?"

"Well..., hey you may even have heard of the guy my parents named me after. He's a musician too. In the sixties he had worked with Bob Dylan..."

"They named you Van Ronk?"

"No, Happy..."

"Happy Traum! Yeah man, I know of him. Big in the Folk movement. Well, I guess you had to grow up with all those Happy jokes. But let me tell you that ain't so bad as knowing most of your life that death is chasing you like a hound dog takes on a rabbit. I was in a car crash with my folks when I was a kid. We hit some native Americans and from that moment on I was living that Robert Johnson

nightmare of Hellhound on my trail. Through all my success playing that Lizard King rock star I was never able to rest. I had to do everything to excess. It was the only way I ever had any peace. I don't know if you can understand that but it's true. It was true. Now, if this is hell, then I'm Happy. Sorry man, I didn't even mean to go there. But you know what I mean. I've just been sitting here for a long time now although I have to tell you that one day just seems like one day. I mean they don't accumulate behind you like they did when I was on the other side. It's just one day and then it's just one day again. I am so surprised that I have such an appetite here. I mean who would have thought that the after life could create such an appetite! Well, it seems pretty far out to me. But since I have it, I quench it. There's always more small game back there than I can eat and I eat a ton of it. The other cool thing is that nobody bugs me. Probably only a handful of conversations since I landed here. I was shocked as hell to see Johnny and Neil show up because I knew somehow that they hadn't really come over. Like you. I can see that you are only a visitor as well. And isn't that the strangest fucking thing you ever heard of. Visitors on the other side. Seems like a violation of terms and conditions to me." He rubbed his beard thoughtfully with his right hand and looked across the river.

He appeared strong and trim not the overweight drunk that had died in his tub. He was alert and intelligent. "Yeah, man, my day is spent watching the boats come in and the new arrivals getting off. That is my great satisfaction. And this ain't the only crossing point either. One thing I learned here is that there are probably a million places just like this one but you never get to go down the river or up the river to investigate. No sir. And I've been watching every day. See there is never any traffic up or down the river it's exclusively across or nothing. Fortunately for you it seems 'across' of late means both ways." Jim stood up and brushed some loose dirt from his jeans. "Right now I feel the need to have a walk. Why don't you eat something and I'll be back in a while." He turned and headed back

into the forest away from the shore. I watched him disappear into the grey, thick woods.

