


# The Long Road to MARLEYVILLE

*(Where Our Hero Learns All About Silver Linings)*

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I'm pretty sure my fishing guide was stoned. His bloodshot eyes had that vacant, "You can knock on the door all you want, but nobody's home" look, and he smelled, in fact he reeked, of marijuana. Yeah, ol' Homer Jones, who I'd known for less than an hour, seemed to have started off the morning with a good buzz on.

"Sheeeit." I thought to myself. "Just what I need. A one man party rowing the boat."

My buddy Mack, who was responsible for booking the trip, looked over, caught my troubled expression, and said, "Relax, amigo. Mellow out. He'll have his act together by the time we're out on the water."

"Right." I said. "You're absolutely right. No problem. It's gonna be a great day."

A few minutes later we walked over to Homer's rig, which was sitting in the fly shop's parking lot with a beat-up fiberglass driftboat hitched on behind. Homer was driving an old Land Cruiser with a rusted electric winch bolted to the front bumper, and there was some seriously loud reggae music blasting from the cab.

*I shot the sheriff, but I didn't shoot no deputy. Oh, no-ooo. I shot the*

sheriff, but I didn't shoot the deputy . . .

It was the original Bob Marley, too, not the more popular Clapton version, and Homer turned and gave me a big, toothy grin.

*All around in my home town, they're trying to track me down. They say they want to bring me in guilty, for the killing of a deputy . . .*

"Are you into Bob Marley, man?"

I nodded.

"Cool, maybe we can smoke a bone or two on the river. Get us in the right frame of mind."

"Ummmm . . ."

"Cool!"

My half-wasted, totally oblivious guide walked back to his boat and began fiddling with the anchor rope. Mack just laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

*Sheriff John Brown always hated me. For what, I don't know. Every time I plant a seed, he say 'Kill it before it grow.' He say 'kill them before they grow.' And so . . .*

The top of the Box ("the Box" being local slang for Box Canyon on the Henry's Fork) was crowded. There were at least a dozen guides waiting to launch their boats and the whole place was buzzing with the electric combination of excitement and anticipation that usually marks the beginning of a day on the river. Mack and I pulled on our waders and rigged up while Homer unstrapped his boat and stowed his cooler, and I made sure to test my tippet knots a couple extra times. The salmonflies were out, cruising through the clear air above our heads like little remote-control helicopters, and I'd already made up my mind to fish the big bugs. Consequently, the last thing I wanted was for a huge Henry's Fork bow to snap my leader like a piece of rotten string simply because one of my blood knots wasn't up to snuff.

I was just finishing up when Homer walked over and asked, "Can I help you with that, man?"

I thought about his offer for a second.

"Thanks, buddy," I told him, "but I'm all set."

"Cool!"

He walked back to the boat, opened his cooler, and popped the top on a can of Bud. I looked at my watch. It was 8:43.

I turned to Mack.

"Ol' Homer is a prince among guides."

Mack just nodded, the first inkling of a pained expression creeping over his face, while in the background Mr. Marley crooned from the inside of the Land Cruiser.

*No woman, no cry. No woman, no cry. Say, say, say I remember when we used to sing . . .*

I walked up to Mack and put my arm around his shoulder.

"A prince . . ."

Everything's gonna be all right, everything's gonna be all right . . .

"among guides."

I would never have pegged Homer as the impatient sort – most of the stoners I knew back in the Seventies were pretty laid back – but apparently his early morning buzz was already winding down and the day's first beer

hadn't kicked in yet. When we were about ready to launch, he looked around, saw the long line of rigs waiting to drop their boats, and rolled his eyes, the whites of which had achieved the distinctive color of a smoky western sunset.

"What a bone, dude," he said, although it was unclear whether he was addressing me, Mack, or some unknown patron saint of fly-fishing guides. "A total bone."

Then an idea seemed to pop into his head, and he brightened right up.

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"Check it out, gentlemen. I'm gonna circumvent this massive traffic jam."

Homer seemed pretty pleased with himself. Not knowing him well, I honestly wasn't sure if he experienced much in the way of regular ideas. Based on the evidence at hand, though, it appeared that even a relatively simple thought might be cause for a certain amount of celebration. So Mack and I stepped away from the rig while Homer fired up the Cruiser, swung it around, and proceeded to back his boat down to the river right next to the Handicapped Fishing Platform.

It was an original concept, all right, the kind of "outside the box" thinking that's been in vogue for the last few years, and the only real problem I could see with Homer's idea was the complete and utter lack of a boat ramp anywhere in the vicinity. Hard-packed dirt fed straight into monster chunks of bankside riprap, and the Henry's Fork started where the riprap left off. Give or take a few inches, that particular section of river was about three feet deep.

Things might have still turned out all right if one of Homer's trailer tires hadn't caught in the space between two big boulders. He tried to ease the trailer back, but with the tire hung up, it wouldn't budge.

When his initial approach didn't work, Homer threw caution to the wind, jammed the Cruiser into 4-wheel-drive, and gunned it. Tires smoked on rock, his rig seemed to compress like a mountain lion gathering itself for a leap, and then the entire trailer went hurtling into the river . . . to be followed almost immediately by Homer and his truck.

Mack and I were instantly joined by a number of fishermen who'd been watching Homer's attempt with both awe and a fair amount of incredulity, and the prevailing opinion seemed to be that neither Homer nor his rig would be going anywhere in the near future. His problem, or at least the first of several, was that the Cruiser was situated at right angles to the current, and the entire force of the river was pushing against the driver's side door, making it impossible to open. He eventually levered



himself out the window, at which point a resounding cheer went up from the crowd gathered at water's edge.

I'm not sure if anyone else noticed it, but as we stood there staring, reggae music was still wafting from his partially submerged vehicle.

*Don't worry about a thing. Cause every little thing's gonna be all right. Don't worry bout a thing. Cause every little thing's gonna be all right . . .*

**M**ack and I waited around for Homer to struggle out of the water with his waders more or less full and his hat askew, and after giving him a second to catch his breath and inquiring about his health – he said that he was, “Fine. I’m fine, guys.” – we asked him what he thought might happen next.

Homer, though, had apparently exhausted his supply of ideas

on his way into the river. Nothing much came to mind for getting back out.

Mack, who's usually a practical sort, pointed at the front of the Cruiser, where we could just make out the electric winch beneath the swirling currents.

“What about hooking up your cable to another truck, Homer, and then winching yourself out?”

“Nah, man, the cable is shot and the spool is so rusted it won't even turn. It's useless. I'm going to have to hitch a ride back to Last Chance and call a tow truck. We're pretty much screwed.”

I have to admit that Homer's assessment of the situation was dead on. He'd be dealing with his predicament for at least the next four or five hours, and as far as floating the Canyon, Mack and I were S.O.L.

Then an idea popped into my head, and I tapped Mack on his shoulder.

*Oh please don't you rock my boat.  
Cause I don't want my boat to be rockin.  
Oh please, don't you rock my boat. Cause  
I don't want my boat to be rockin . . .*

“Hey,” I told him, “we're standing here with fly rods in our hands and we're only ten feet from one of the best stretches of river in the world. Why don't we go fishing?”

Mack looked at me, and what had been a pained expression – the beginnings of what our guide might have referred to as “a real bone of a look” – slid from his face and was replaced by a glimmer of cautious optimism. In fact, I could see the tension start to drain from his body as if he'd just chugged a couple of Homer's beers.

“That sounds like a plan. Lead on, my friend,” he said. “Lead on.”

I looked downstream toward the boat launch, upstream at the water racing out from Island Park dam, and then across the river, where a midstream gravel bar gave relatively easy access to the far bank, a bank with half a dozen partially submerged logs and a few large boulders. We only had to cross the channel in between, just upstream from Homer's truck, and we'd be able to fish up along either side of the gravel bar as well as the entire far side of the river.

An added, and rather substantial, benefit was that since we were upstream from the boat launch, we'd have the water to ourselves. All the guides were loading their clients and heading straight down into the canyon. Nobody was bothering to row upstream to fish the couple hundred yards between the launch and Island Park dam.

So Mack and I climbed down over the riprap, linked arms for a little extra stability in the fast, deep current, and paused

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for just a second before we waded out into the river. We were only about ten yards upstream from Homer's rig at that point, and amazingly, Bob Marley was still cranking out of the open window.

*Exodus, all right, movement of the people. Oh yeah. Exodus, movement of the people. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Open your eyes . . .*

I turned to Mack, a wisecrack poised on the tip of my tongue, but he was already singing along with Homer's tape.

*Open you eyes. Look within. Are you satisfied with the life you're living?*

"I will be," I told him, "when I'm casting my five-weight instead of holding your damn hand."

We stepped out into the water, and for a moment or two the heavy flow threatened to wash us downstream. I had the brief but uncomfortable feeling that my plan was going to turn out more like Homer's than I cared to admit.

Fortunately, we were able to maintain our balance and fight our way across the current, and we eventually made it over to the gravel bar in the center of the river.

"That was a little hairy," Mack said when I let go of his arm. "We might want to find someplace else to cross on the way back."

I wasn't in the mood for complaints. "Stop moaning. We'll worry about getting back after we've caught some of the trout that are supposed to be stacked in here like cordwood." I looked around for a second. "Where do you want to try?"

"I'm going to work those boulders and logs on the far bank. I'll catch up with you a little later." Then he smiled, gave me a thumbs up salute, and started over towards the other side of the river. Which left me all the water upstream toward the dam.

I paused for just a second, giving thanks to the man upstairs that Homer's disaster hadn't completely ruined the day, and then I started walking up along the gravel bar, looking for a likely spot to float a big bushy dry fly. One particular area caught my attention while I was

still thirty yards downstream. There was a riffle that dropped off into a deep, fast run and the current in the transition zone was broken by an underwater rock the size of a Labrador retriever. I'd have bet a week's paycheck that there was a nice fish on that submerged boulder, so I snuck up from below, worked out a little line, and dropped my first cast of the day five feet in front of the rock.

The fly landed, twisted just a bit in the current, and then rode the broken surface as if it was a salmon fly fluttering to free itself from the current. Which it must have seemed to the Nose below.

The Nose.

For that's what appeared, at least for the moment I saw it. Some sort of monstrous, Durante-like beak, the kind that was surely attached to a fish weighing well into the double digits.

The Nose rose up, water sliding to either side of the great proboscis as if Moses was parting the Red Sea, and then my fly was gone. Not taken. Just gone.

I set the hook more by instinct than conscious thought and held on for dear life as the fish of my dreams swam slowly upstream against the current. For those first few moments, everything else ceased to exist. My wife, my kids and my job disappeared. Mack could have been in a different state. Homer, our recently baptized fishing guide, was erased from my mind so completely that he might never have been born at all.

It was almost Biblical, the strength of my attachment to that fish. I was connected by both my fly line and the Grace of God to a trout big enough to eat ducks, and I swore to myself that I was going to bring him to hand and thank him before I let him go. I was going to bring him to hand or . . . no, anything else was too horrible to contemplate. I had to land that fish. There was no other alternative; I would accept no other possibility.

So I put the wood to him. I was fishing a brand new 3x tippet, a super material that had supposedly tested out at almost 10 pounds, and I decided right then and there that it was going to be a short, nasty fight – no babying this huge fish, no letting him rest or relax. He was in a heap of trouble, even if he didn't know it yet.

Of course it turned out that I was the

one in a heap of trouble. I started out with my five-weight bent in a big U and that damn fish just kept making the bend tighter and tighter until I was sure the rod was going to snap in half. I eventually had to stop palming the reel and let him run. Which he did. Indeed, he did.

He went upstream twenty yards or so, the strong current seemingly no impediment at all, and then he curved back downstream, roaring past me like some guided cruise missile of a fish. At which point his innate radar system took over and he headed across the current in the general direction of the Handicapped Fishing Platform, where a number of anglers had gathered to watch my battle.

And, unfortunately, towards Homer's truck.

I can't tell you what I said when I realized that my fish, quite possibly the biggest trout in a river known for producing leviathans, was swimming right at Homer's rig. You can use your imagination, though, and you'll end up with a pretty good idea of the stuff I was spouting.

Of course the fish didn't care. He may never have seen Homer's truck before, but he sure knew a nice, safe looking snag when he saw one. And the Cruiser certainly fit the bill.

So I found myself in a difficult situation. If I didn't do anything, my trout was going to wedge himself into some crevice of Homer's rig and break me off. If I tried to stop him, he'd probably snap either the tippet or my rod. Still, the latter option, poor as it was, offered the most potential, so I hauled back, using every ounce of my strength and putting a bend in that rod like it had never seen before.

It was one of those pregnant moments, one of those hushed, anticipatory moments when time seems, if not to stand still, at least to slow down to the point where each and every minor detail catches and holds your eye.

Those details shattered, though, when instead of breaking off, my fish decided to jump. He came out of the water like . . . hell, I don't know what he was like, it was a damn explosion, this impossibly huge, impossibly bright rainbow, bigger than any steelhead I'd ever hooked, blowing up out of the water right next to Homer's

truck like some sort of piscatorial detonation, and he was twisting, shaking, quivering; trying to throw that big orange fly from the corner of his mouth.

And in that moment I knew the true meaning of amazement.

For, incredible as it seems, he jumped right through the Land Cruiser's open window.

There was a hush, a second or two when neither the anglers on the bank nor the river itself seemed to make a sound, and then I realized what I'd originally thought was the pounding of my heart was in fact a rock steady bass. It was coming from the truck.

*I want to love you, and treat you right. I want to love you, every day and every night. We'll be together . . .*

don't remember much after that. I crossed over, certainly, but how or where I'm not sure. All I can say is that the world had suddenly been reduced to the size of Homer's Land Cruiser, and I didn't have eyes for anything else.

I eventually made it to the window, the same one from which Homer had effected his escape, and looked in. There was water everywhere, the surface littered with the shaggy, sodden remnants of my erstwhile guide's life. Flies large and small floated in a riot of shapes and colors, soggy rolling papers had washed up on a unopened bag of sour cream and onion potato chips, what looked to be a half eaten Snickers Bar bobbed up and down like a . . . well, you get the idea.

It took me a moment to get my bearings, to see past the detritus and down into the bottom of the truck. He was there, of course, his head by the clutch pedal, his tail extending all the way over to the passenger's side. May lightning strike me dead if I'm lying. And for a few seconds it seemed, it really seemed, as if his tail was sweeping back and forth to Bob crooning:

*Is this love, is this love, is this love, is this love that I'm feeling? Is this love, is this love, is this love, is this love that I'm feeling?*

There's no doubt in my mind. It was love. Rastaman Vibration Huge Trout Love.