

## The Fence

The wire-mesh fence was tall, but not so tall that I couldn't climb over it. Attached to one of the posts was a sign that read:

### NO TRESPASSING

I had never let such signs stop me in the past, of course, and didn't intend to let this one stop me either. I walked from the road to the fence and began climbing over it. In no time I was standing on the other side.

A narrow, rocky stream was on my right. It flowed back under the fence and then beneath a small stone bridge in the road. Ahead of me, on the left side of the stream, was a trail, also narrow and rocky, sloping upwards, apparently into the mountains. I had no idea where the trail went, but thought I'd follow it anyways. I liked the idea of going where I had never been before. Besides, I could always retrace my steps back to the fence if it turned out the trail didn't lead anywhere.

I began putting one boot in front of the other, feeling myself being lifted higher and higher with each step. The trees overhead were thick, blocking out the sky. As I continued climbing, the trees began to thin out. I could still catch glimpses of the stream to my right, but it was now far below me. It had also widened and deepened. The current looked strong and powerful.

By late afternoon the trail had reached the top of a ridge. I paused for a rest. In the distance I could see the tops of purple mountains, with the golden sun setting just behind them. It was getting late, I thought.

The vegetation had almost completely disappeared. The stream—it was now a river—lay far below me in a deep gorge, with rocky cliffs on either side. The trail drew closer and closer to the edge of the cliff and finally disappeared altogether.

I stood there on the edge of the cliff looking down at the river below. The precipice seemed about twice as high as I'd imagined it. It was sheer, with no protruding rocks, nothing at all to grab on to. The water below was white with foam.

Suddenly I had the urge to jump. I wanted to know what it would be like to tumble through the air and plunge deep into the water. I would die, of course, but what other way would I be able to gain this knowledge? As I stood there, teetering on the side of the cliff and wondering what to do, something else attracted my attention.

Ahead was a rocky summit, thrusting itself majestically into the blue sky. I then began to wonder what the view would be like from that summit. I imagined being able to see the entire world from that height. And the thought occurred to me: beauty cannot be grasped except by taking risks.

The only way forward would be to edge my way along the precarious rocks to the top. It was far more reasonable to turn back, but I wanted to know what lay ahead. A mystery seemed to be waiting for me there and I had to find out what it was. I resolved to press on.

As soon as I'd taken my first step, I began to reconsider. The rocks looked impassable.

It was then that I noticed that the river had reversed its course. It was widening and gushing *up* the mountain. The cliffs soared higher and higher as the river carved itself deeper and deeper into the gorge. Further ahead the river curved sharply to the right and then disappeared into a dark fold between the two cliffs.

I cannot explain how I lost my grip on the rocks, but I do remember the fall. It was long and silent, even elegant. It seemed I would never reach the river below.

Then I felt the cold water envelop me as I plunged beneath the surface. I was instantly alert, as if I'd never been truly aware of myself until that very moment. I continued sinking downwards. The river had no bottom.

It was some time before the thick, icy water finally broke the momentum of my fall. I struggled to swim to the surface but knew I had fallen in much too deep to reach it. The current was strong and powerful. I felt it carrying me, against my will, upward around the curve in the gorge. There was nothing

I could do to stop it.

I thought to myself, "I'm going to drown. I'm going to drown in this river."

I've heard it said, as no doubt everyone has, that a person's whole life flashes before their eyes just before they die. But I had no such experience. I knew I was going to die, but my only thought was to live. I thrashed my arms and kicked my feet even harder, trying to get to the surface. I had already expended all my energy, all my oxygen in a futile attempt to resurrect myself. The current continued pushing me ahead, more powerful now than ever.

I let my limbs go limp and surrendered to the current. As soon as I had stopped struggling, a feeling of peace and contentment came over me. It was only then that I asked myself, "Have I lived a life worth living?"

Then the current itself gently carried me to the surface. I broke through the water, gasping for air. I resumed my thrashing but found that there was no need to. The river followed the U-shape of the gorge and was now carrying me round the bend and down the other side of the mountain.

My panting gradually subsided. The current slowed and the water became calm and peaceful. The cliffs on either side of me began to melt away. In the distance I could see the valley the river was flowing towards. I knew that I would be able to make it home after all.

The river narrowed and turned into a stream again. My feet began to hit rocks on the stream's bottom. Soon the water was shallow enough for me to be able to stand up and pull myself out of the current, which was little more than a trickle.

Ahead of me I could see a road. Immediately I knew that it was the same road I'd been on just before embarking on my journey. Apparently it wound its way around the mountain and I was some distance away from the point where I had started.

As I walked closer to the road, I could see glimmers of the day's last sunlight flashing on the wire mesh of the fence. It was the same fence I had climbed over earlier—the one with the NO TRESPASSING sign. But now the fence was taller.

Much taller.

Infinitely taller than the cliff I had fallen from, in fact.

It did not take me long to figure out that I would not be able to climb back over the fence. I searched for a hole to pass through but could not find one. The wire mesh was flawless. I looked around for something to cut the wire with, but of course there was nothing. I considered jumping back into the stream and trying to float under the fence, but there was hardly any water left and the sharp wire mesh reached all the way to the streambed.

I was starting to become frustrated, wondering how I would ever get across the fence to the road.

There was no possibility of going back the way I had come, of course, but no other choices seemed to be available either. The way to the right was blocked by a sheer stone cliff, not as tall as the one I had fallen from, but just as difficult to scale. To the left the lower slopes of the mountains spread out onto a treeless plain, but the high fence went on in that direction for as far as my eyes could see.

"There's no way out," I concluded, kicking a soaked hiking boot against a rock.

The shadows of dusk were falling fast.