

Hard Creek Bridge

a short story

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Hard Creek Bridge

Slim Jackson glided through Abe Lincoln University's fall orientations and 'Freshmen Only' parties with ease and still managed to enter his second semester friendless and shy. During his first college winter break, he did all of the things that made him miss his country home when he left for school. He woke up every morning to Mom's fresh bacon and eggs. He helped Dad chop wood in the evenings. Some afternoons, he would sit on the back porch and stare into the people-less forest. Now, back at school, there was no wood or fresh food. But there was especially no Mom and Dad.

Slim, a short, thin, young man, stepped off the bus to a crowded, unforgiving atmosphere, where socks matched every day, and peers cared about name brands. His thin, orange backpack was nearly empty and he carried his clothes in a shiny, brown duffel bag. He wore his late grandfather's adjustable, blue, wordless cap over his shoulder-length brown hair. He wore that cap every day since his grandfather died twelve years ago. Slim always saw it as a bright blue symbol on his head, one that signified allegiance to another place and time. The only time he took it off was when he showered.

The bus dropped Slim off in a different section of campus than it did the first semester. He was never forced to walk this way to the dorm before. It was early evening and getting dark. Students would soon be tucked in their rooms to avoid the air's chill. The streets were already quieter than usual. Slim walked beside a pothole-filled road. There was no sidewalk, so he balanced on the thin section of asphalt past where the road lines ended. He didn't mind the stroll. He liked to walk alone. At least, that's what he told himself. The road twisted through campus like string through a knot. Still new to campus, Slim just followed the arrowed signs to his dorm, but the road only seemed to lead him farther and farther away.

Slim kept walking, switching his duffel bag – which became heavier as he went – from arm to arm, and becoming angry as the weird road took him to unknown distances from campus. He found himself in a wooded area, surrounded by the bark and leafless branches of the trees of late fall. There was a slight comfort in this new area. It vaguely, for a moment, reminded Slim of home. But Slim was tiring fast and this new comfort soon left him. The road was barely big enough for cars. Not a hint of campus was nearby. Light faded quickly.

Two hours after the bus dropped him off, the duffel bag tortured Slim's arms. Even his near-empty backpack seemed to reach for the ground, pulling Slim with it. He concluded that the arrows were wrong, that he was lost, and that he should turn around and choose a different path. Someone must be playing a joke, he thought, and he looked around for laughing bystanders. That's when he heard a soft rumble. The sound came from just around the next bend. Slim mistook it for the noise of a party and hoped there was someone who could give him directions to his temporary home. The rumble was not a party. When Slim turned the corner, he saw a creek and he walked closer. There was a green sign in front of a wide, short bridge.

"Hard Creek," Slim read aloud. He looked at the slow, trickling water far below and laughed at the obvious irony. He saw his dorm, finally, beyond the bridge, just past the line of bare trees. He laughed again, harder.

The manmade bridge was like a pile of leftover cement, leveled off at the top, with large holes drilled through the sides to allow the water to pass through. It had a wooden railing on one edge. Although the water moved slowly, it traveled at a far fall from the bridge. The canyon-like crevice created the means by which the echoing rumble of the water traveled.

Slim started across.

When he reached the center of the cement pile, a soft breeze crept by and carried his cap off his head. Slim tried to catch it, but he was too slow. He turned around and saw his hat waiting for him at the beginning of the bridge. With a shrug and a sigh, he retrieved it, placed it on his head, and tried again. He had barely started the bridge the second time when the wind caught his cap again. It first fell just behind him. He reached down, but the wind pushed it back again before Slim could grab it.

Still suspecting he was the butt of some joke, Slim glanced around. He saw nothing and looked at Hard Creek for a moment before grabbing his hat once more. He scrunched his face and put the hat on backwards to be more aerodynamic. He made it halfway across before an incredibly strong wind rolled over the creek like it was a blow from Satan himself. The wind's force spun Slim around twice and pushed him against the lone railing. His grandfather's cap fell into Hard Creek, lost. He crawled in a panic to the beginning of the bridge, sat in the middle of the road, and cried.

The sun had completely set and the moon's dim light barely passed through the empty tree branches. The air was a biting cold that stung Slim's skin. The only sound Slim heard was Hard Creek's soft, slow, echoing trickle, and his own sniffing nose. For a moment, the wind seemed nonexistent.

"There's no hope," he suddenly said, touching his empty head. "All hope is lost."

He heard the wind coming again, like a freight train's warning whistle. Slim stood on the road in front of the bridge and waited. When the wind train arrived, Slim felt nothing. He saw everything.

Slim watched fallen branches mixing with the dirt and dead leaves, all rushing by like they were the product of some futuristic, high-powered cannon. A mist from the trickle below brushed his face. Then, from beneath the bridge rose his cap. The wind pulled it up, banging it against the cement and the mud, soaking it in filth. Yet, it remained untoppled. The wind held it above the ground, at the end of the bridge, and there it levitated, spinning in its place.

Slim's eyes squinted to see the floating object past all of the flying water and debris. When he focused his attention on it, his teeth clenched and his lips tightened. He opened his duffel bag and unstrung the shoelaces from an extra pair of shoes. He tied the laces together and used them to strap his duffel bag to his backpack. He started Hard Creek Bridge one final time.

When his first foot took the first step on the bridge, the wind blew his leg from under him and he fell. He did not stop or crawl back to the beginning. Instead, he picked himself up, using the railing to balance. The harsh breeze pounded him against the railing repeatedly. The dead leaves sliced his skin, drawing blood on his cheeks and forehead. Still, he managed to pull himself along.

The thick trees that lined the creek bent and cracked. They fell like thin branches. The far away trickle of Hard Creek shot over the bridge like the blast from a fireman's hose. The deafening siren sound of the wind drowned the heavy noise of Slim's crying. The cement chipped. A chunk slapped him in the head. He fell again. The railing – Slim's only support besides his own legs, which seemed useless now – began to give way to the pounding wind currents. Slim noticed, but could not let go.

"Damn you wind!" he screamed into the sky, chancing the wave of a fist. "I want my hat."

Taking a chance on the falling railing, Slim pulled himself up once again. His steps were heavier than before. With his chest out, he cut his eyes to the cap.

He darted. One final thrust towards the floating, blue memory. It was an effort that surprised even him. In his dive for the prize, the wind caught him and his feet left the ground. The wind began to spin him sideways in the air. The wooden railing gave way and joined the debris. Slim reached out his desperate hand and, as the harsh wind turned him and pushed him closer to the edge of the bridge, the cap landed in his grasp.

All stopped.

Slim fell hard to the ground, cap in hand.

“I did it,” he whispered to himself.

Sweat and wet tears blanketed his face when he stood. Dust and mud hid his clothing. Slim refused to wipe himself off. He looked at the cap, also covered in filth, and reveled in the fact that there were no rips in the old blue material. Besides the dirt, the cap was no different than before, but Slim saw in it an uncanny, unmatched, and untorn strength he did not know was there. He smiled.

Slim tossed his cap into Hard Creek. It floated lightly and finally rested on its own rock in the middle of the stream. Slim watched it fall until it was a dirty blue dot on a small, hard surface. When it hit its resting place, Slim noticed, for the first time, a collection of colors on the rocks. The brightest reds, greens, yellows, and blues he had ever seen, each one on its own separate rock in the middle of Hard Creek, like a museum’s display of war artifacts, a stream of colorful memories let go, but never washed away.

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