

THE CROSSING

A NOVELLA

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The following is a sample of my novella *The Crossing*,
an anchor piece in my book [Rolling The Bones](#).

Rolling The Bones is available in trade paperback
(490 pgs) from both [Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#),
and is now also available for [Kindle](#).

Enjoy!

*"Some day you will be old enough
to start reading fairy tales again."*

~ C. S. Lewis

THE CROSSING

A NOVELLA BY RAND EASTWOOD

What had been a clear blue sky during the heat of the day was now solidly overcast, clouds heaving and churning like boiling pewter as thunderstorms moved in from the south.

Below the turmoil, Tommy Baker stood motionless on the edge of a rocky canyon cliff high above Hope Creek, his black silhouette cut from the steely glare of the molten sky. Alternating tufts of golden and sun-bleached blonde hair gesticulated atop the young boy's head, grappling with the spectral gusts that swirled about him.

The cooler air, pushing ahead of the approaching storm, rustled its way into the tired tree branches, knotted brush, and waist-high grass of the untamed field that lay behind him, and

Hope Creek Canyon yawned up at him from below, deep and cavernous, the stench of death on its breath.

Trying to ignore the raspy, speculative whispering of the audience of weeds and dry grass that anxiously observed him from behind, he contemplated the scene that now played out before him.

The dreaded rope bridge.

Old Rope, the locals called it.

And every kid in town feared it.

But I'm not a kid anymore; I'll be thirteen tomorrow.

Thirteen.

A teenager.

And *teenagers* aren't afraid of stupid rope bridges...*are they?*

He watched as the bridge shuddered, creaked, and groaned in the rising wind, mocking him as he stood there, petrified.

And he knew that the longer he waited, the worse it was going to get.

As if on cue, in that single moment of hesitation the gusts picked up even more, the storm about to unleash its full fury.

Now *Old Rope* danced in the wind before him, bidding him—no, *daring* him—to come cross. To Tommy, the perpetual creaking and cracking of all the brittle, decaying ropes that snaked throughout the ancient rickety boards sounded as if they were about to *snap!*, thereby plunging any hapless occupants screaming to their deaths in the rocky canyon below.

Suspicious, the boy sensed trickery: *Old Rope* was simply waiting, that's all; waiting for him to venture nervously on board, and—once he had traveled too far across, and was just beyond the point of no return—the evil old bridge would gladly let go, laughing as it happily sent Tommy on an unsolicited ride down, all the way to the bottom of the canyon, where the rushing creek skirted around a gauntlet of deadly obstacles:

sharp boulders that jutted up from the water like giant stone teeth; partially submerged logs that lay in wait like so many crocodiles; crowded colonies of dead, broken saplings rising into the air like razor-sharp tribal spear traps.

He also knew that if he did go down, and wasn't fortunate enough to be killed instantly on the rocks below—then there were always the turtles and water snakes and carp to finish him off, lurking in hidden cesspools and coves all along the banks of the creek, evil creatures hungrily awaiting just such an opportune feast.

If, that is, he was actually *stupid* enough (or *crazy* enough!) to brave the veritable death trap that dangled haphazardly so high above Hope Creek in the first place.

And in the *wind*, no less...

As the boy contemplated all this, he could barely make out the ominous sound of the rushing creek far below.

Though he was surrounded by the normal sounds of the wilderness—the incessant hiss of cicadas, the birdsong drifting from the woods, the grass and weeds hissing in the wind behind him—he could hear, just beyond all that, something much more sinister: Hope Creek whispering up the canyon walls, the canyon walls relaying the message to Old Rope, and Old Rope beckoning to Tommy...

It was a conspiracy of murderers.

The boy was kicking himself for being so careless earlier in the day, when the stifling summer heat had coaxed old Rope into a still and dormant slumber, and it had been so much easier to cross.

Now he was stuck on the other side, needed to get back across, and was fast running out of time—for nightfall was lurking in the shadows, storm clouds were waltzing in atop the trees, Old Rope was rehearsing its dance of death before him,

and the wind was escalating in its intensity with each passing minute.

And he didn't like what he saw.

Not one bit.

•

"Are you ready, Commander Thomas?" Winnie asked, peering intently at his friend through his thick, black plastic-rimmed glasses.

"That's an affirmative, Commander Winston."

Tommy and his best friend Winnie Milhouse were preparing for what had become a month-long mission: arming themselves with their newly-acquired Wrist-Wrocket slingshots, then venturing out into the uncivilized wilderness (otherwise known as the field on the other side of Hope Creek Canyon) to *shoot stuff*.

For the past month, they'd performed this ritual almost daily—ever since they'd acquired the new weapons in town at Hank's Hobbies & Sporting Gear...

It was the summer of '78, and had been the hottest anyone in the town of Hope could remember. Even the old codgers—who'd been around here for what seemed like *forever*, like before the town was really even a town—lamented this fact as they rocked in their old rockers out on their old wooden porches, puffing on their cigarettes or cigars or corncob pipes:

Yes-sir-ree...this here's the hottest summer I ever seen round these parts...

One day, earlier that summer—end of June, first of July, right in there—the temperature had already hit a hundred degrees by noon, and was threatening to keep right on going, like it was pissed off about something and was cranking it up just to get even.

Tommy was over at Winnie's house. They'd gotten bored

playing war with their army soldiers and rubber bands, and Winnie's mom had gone to work for the evening (she worked part-time as a cashier at the old *Gas-n-Grub* gas station and convenience store that occupied the busiest corner of *Railroad Pass*, the small retail center located at the big flashing light where the railroad tracks crossed Main Street up on the north side of town; his dad was a truck driver, so was seldom home, and all Winnie knew was that for the past month, he'd been out on the east coast somewhere), so they decided to ride their bikes into town and see if they could score some fireworks for the Fourth—*real* fireworks, not the lame snakes and sparklers and smoke bombs that most the kids their age had to settle for.

The Milhouses lived in a square white clapboard house, one of an entire row of identical square white clapboard houses that ran the entire length of Hillsboro Lane (which Tommy always teasingly referred to as "Hillbilly Lane" in honor of his best friend). Hillsboro Lane was just another crumbling, weed-flanked street in the seedy area of town known as The Flats, a cluster of low-income neighborhoods that were marginalized to the eastern-most edge of town, sectioned off by the industrial railroad tracks that ran along its western boundary.

Or, as Tommy would say with a shrug and a smile: "You know—where the hillbillies live!"

From Hillsboro Lane, the boys rode up to the north end of The Flats and turned left onto Homestretch Avenue, a big four-laner that stretched east-west all the way through the town of Hope, running downtown through Town Square and crossing Main Street smack-dab in the middle of Grande Festival Plaza, where all the best shops were (and where it might be busy enough that they could snatch some Black Cats or M-80s or bottle rockets or Roman candles in all the hustle and bustle without getting caught).

The brand-new, jet-black asphalt of Homestretch—they'd just resurfaced it, bright new yellow and white lines and everything—intensified the already stifling heat of the day; it was like riding their bikes around in a black skillet with the stove cranked. Feeling like they were melting in the heat by the time they got to Town Square, they decided to cut south onto Fifth Street before they reached the plaza and stop at Hank's, see about picking up a couple of canteens, then filling them at the water fountain out front of the public library, just down Fifth Street and right on Chapel Lane, across from Hope in Christ church (over the years they had found that for some reason, at that water fountain the water always came out cold, even in the summer, no matter how hot it got).

When they finally reached Hank's, they parked their bikes out front under the awning and hurried inside, both so soaked with sweat they looked like they'd just come in out of the rain.

Heading across the store for the camping and fishing section in the back, they got sidetracked when they spied the shiny new slingshots in the display case up by the register where they kept the pellet and BB guns (which, unfortunately, were out of the question for them; county ordinance said you had to be sixteen to buy those—fifteen if you took and passed the county's gun safety course and were also fortunate enough to get your parents to sign a waiver, yeah right).

Stopping just short of the first aisle—the model train stuff—they discussed it briefly, and were pretty sure the county's age restriction was just for pellet and BB guns, and not for slingshots. With that decided, they about-faced and beelined up to the glass case by the register.

There were three Wrist-Wrockets on display: a metallic red one, a metallic blue one, and an all-silver one—which gleamed so brightly under the fluorescent lights that it looked

white. This deception gave the entire showcase a convincingly patriotic look—quite appropriate for the upcoming Fourth of July holiday.

Huddling together, the boys nearly drooled as they peered through the glass, admiring the finely crafted weaponry.

"You boys just gonna stand there foggin up the glass, or you gonna buy somethin?"

Startled, the boys simultaneously jerked their eyes up toward the voice. Hank himself was standing behind the counter, down at the end by the phone. He leaned casually against the wall, big arms across his broad chest, smirking. The office door stood open behind him, revealing an old wooden desk buried under an astonishing array of clutter. Somewhere behind that mess, a smoldering cigarette poured a thin gray stream into the air. Glaring white sunlight from a small window in the back wall cut a white square tube diagonally through the light-blue haze that permeated the entire room.

They were surprised to see him here; finding Hank working the store this early in the day during the summer was unusual. He fished a lot (and, it was rumored, drank a lot) and so his son, Joey—or one of Joey's thug friends from his high school shop class—was usually working, chomping gum at the counter or yakking for hours on the phone or sneaking around the corner for a smoke when business was slow and nobody was looking.

But oddly, Hank was here today.

Probably too hot to fish.

Maybe even too hot to drink.

"They're new," he said as he pushed off the wall with his shoulder and walked over. He was a stocky man, but moved with a smooth, confident gait. Though still solid and muscular, the years had brought on a slight beer gut and slightly receded hair line. His remaining hair, mostly gray now, was pulled back

into a ponytail, a defiant stand against his own creeping age, which was proving futile; for even with the ponytail, and even with the platinum ear studs he sported in both ears, his accumulating years were starting to show—the inevitable bags and wrinkles moving in uninvited, there goes the neighborhood.

All except his eyes, that is; his bright, piercing blue eyes seemed ageless; youthful, alert. The one part of him that accurately reflected his perpetually youthful state of mind:

Fifty going on twenty-five.

An avid outdoorsman, his darkly tanned, leathery complexion was amplified by a contrasting short-trimmed silver goatee. Numerous tattoos colored his forearms, some of them military.

He was hands-down the coolest adult Tommy and Winnie had ever met.

As he approached, smiling as always, the two reveled in the ashen smell of cigarette smoke and the manly aroma of cheap cologne that always accompanied him to the counter.

Just as he reached the boys, he stooped and disappeared behind the counter. Then, in a muffled voice:

"You're in luck...just got 'em in yesterday, on the truck."

The boys stared into the glass case, watching in anticipation. The sound of keys jingling, followed by a *click!*, then the mirrored wall in the back of the case suddenly slid open, almost making the boys dizzy as the optical illusion of depth vanished and the back half of the merchandise before them appeared to break away and angle sideways.

Hank retrieved the silver one, stood, and made a show of properly orienting it and placing it carefully on the glass counter in front of them, handling it gently like some rare, delicate artifact.

The boys stared at it, googly-eyed, Winnie's eyes appearing even bigger behind the thick lenses.

Hank pointed an open hand at each feature, the tips of his fingers following along its smooth contours as he spoke:

"Aircraft-grade aluminum alloy frame...maximum-velocity surgical-grade rubber tubing...genuine cowhide pouch—"

—he paused to look up at the boys, adding: "Comes with an extra one—and an extra set of rubbers, too," then looked back down and proceeded as the boys giggled at the word—

"—precision-molded handle inlaid with high-impact, all-weather neoprene pistol grips..."

Amazed, the boys looked at each other, then turned back.

Hank held it out to Tommy. "Feel how light it is."

Tommy accepted the weapon carefully, with respect.

"Reach up through the wrist support and hold the grip like a pistol. The wrist support rests up here on your forearm, pad on top, with the uprights angled back toward you."

As Winnie watched with envy, Tommy slid his left arm through the wrist support, gripped the handle firmly, then held the weapon out at arm's length. With his right hand, he gently pulled the pouch back, extending the rubber tubing nearly to his shoulder. He closed one eye, sighted down his arm, and pointed the slingshot toward the open office door. He was amazed at how the forearm support enabled maximum extension of the rubber tubes, without putting too much stress on his wrist. Pivoting upward, he moved his aim from the office door to the corner of the ceiling above the entrance.

As Tommy's arm rose, Winnie noticed something near the bottom of the Wrist-Wrocket's handle, and stooped, hands on knees, to get a better look, squinting up at it through his glasses.

Still stooping, he turned to Hank.

"What's the button at the bottom of the handle for?"

Upon hearing this, Tommy relaxed the stretched rubber tubes and flipped the whole thing over, peering at the bottom

of the handle.

"Ahhh, very observant, young man," Hank commended, relieving Tommy of the now upside-down weapon. "Watch this."

The boys watched intently as Hank flipped it back to its upright position. They hadn't noticed it before, but they could now see the small domed top of an aluminum button protruding from the backside of the handle just below the grip, centered between the two tubes of the wrist support that extended back toward the user. When he pushed it, a tiny, nearly inaudible *click!* was heard, and Hank folded the wrist support upward against the handle, then pulled the rubber tubes down, hooking the pouch into the crevice that was created by the open hinge.

"Folds for easy storage."

With one hand, he slipped the whole thing casually into his back pocket, then made a show of brushing his hands briskly together, like he had just performed a feat of magic.

"No way!" The boys exclaimed in unison.

"Way," Hank responded quietly, nodding matter-of-factly.

"Now, take a look at this."

As the boys watched, he whisked it out of his pocket, unhooked the pouch, snapped the frame open with a *click!*, then turned it over, placing it upside down on the glass, in much the same way as the boys would do with their bikes whenever they needed to put the chain back on, or fix a flat, or clip some playing cards to the forks along the spokes, or maybe just shine up some old pennies.

With a flick of his wrist, he spun a quarter-sized aluminum cap off the end of the handle, revealing an empty chamber topped with a gleaming, finely machined thread that screamed of quality craftsmanship.

"Ammo storage."

"Whoa," Tommy said as Winnie let out a low whistle.

"And that's not all."

With one hand, Hank flipped the lid into the air like a coin, caught it in his other hand, then held it out to them, displaying a black rubber gasket installed on the inside.

"Waterproof."

"Keeps the rocks dry," Winnie said, nodding.

"Yeah...very cool," Tommy agreed.

"Not rocks."

The boys looked up with puzzled looks just as Hank turned and pulled a small white cardboard box off a shelf behind him. In a series of deft moves, he turned back, slapped the box on the counter, spun it around to face them, and flipped the top back, revealing rows upon rows of shiny steel balls, layered over an inch deep.

"Precision-ground, high-speed stainless steel ball bearings. Handle holds up to forty rounds. There's two hundred to a box, and each unit comes with a box."

The boys looked at each other and smiled, excited.

"So...how much?" Tommy asked.

"Well, lucky for you guys, they're on sale right now for the Fourth, our annual Independence Day Sale. Normally twenty-five, I'm lettin 'em go for twenty. Don't forget, that includes an extra set of rubbers, an extra pouch, and a box of balls—and the balls, bought separately, run four bucks a box, so that's four more dollars you're savin'."

Another low whistle from Winnie.

Hank then paused for a moment, leaning with both hands on the counter, tapping one finger on the glass as he looked off into space somewhere, chewing on a thought. Then he looked back to the boys:

"Tell you what—you guys both buy a Wrist-Wrocket, and

I'll throw in a coupla boxes of balls, on the house...one extra box for each ya."

Hank looked back and forth between the two boys, eyes glowing with youthful enthusiasm—then winked mischievously and clicked his tongue, nodding at them like they were all in on some big secret together.

The boys turned to each other and smiled ear-to-ear.

"That's a good deal," Tommy said pseudo-knowledgeably.

"Yeah—but where we gonna get the money?" Winnie asked.

Screwing the cap back onto the handle, Hank said:

"Well, you boys think it over, then come back and see me when you decide. And don't worry, if the sale's over, I'll go ahead and hook you up with the discount anyway...*if* I have any of 'em left, that is...I expect they'll sell out pretty quick."

With that, he stooped, set the Wrist-Wrocket back into the glass display case, slid the mirrored back door shut, and locked it with a *click!*

The tiny bell tinkled above the boys as they pushed excitedly out of Hank's Hobbies & Sporting Gear and quickly mounted their bikes, hitting the busy street with just one goal in mind: acquiring their new Wrist-Wrocket sling shots as soon as possible!

It wasn't until they'd pedaled halfway to Grande Festival Plaza in the blazing summer heat that they realized that in their enthusiasm over the Wrist-Wrockets, they'd forgotten all about the canteens.

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