

## Journey to Redemption

Bill Boudreau

Decades ago, I mounted Lightning, the flame-colored stallion of life, and rode away from my birthplace. I'd never ridden before. Naïve and unaware of the perils of the world, I spurred Lightning at full canter in the direction of my youthful dream, a place I'd fantasized. I let Lightning gallop at will, free rein, toward that destination.

Visions of a new world excited me, then. Images of glory prodded me like a sword at my back. A world of excess sizzled my aspiration. Unwittingly, I was vulnerable to the sweetness of the flesh. Primal voices beckoned me. An appetite for new knowledge stirred my intellect. Hunger to achieve taunted me.

Sometimes in my sleep, I still hear a song my grandfather sang to me—*If you only knew what's in front of you, my Child, my Child /If I could only tell that all will be well, my Child, my Child...*

The trail had been long and winding. Looking back, I can see where we'd trotted, and a single road had faced me. We all have gauntlets to endure. For each one of us, it's unique, and many times, of our own making.

In earlier days, I didn't know what was around the corner. Perhaps, if I'd known, I wouldn't have gone forward—a blessing, a curse?

Time went on.

Lightning didn't want to gallop as often.

Fire that had ignited my spirit years before, continued to burn, but at a diminished heat—a warm flame that didn't char the soul. Kept my essence vibrant.

Arriving in front of a rocky cliff, more like a tower. I dismounted, looked up at the stone rise that reminded me of a temple, a shrine, or an altar. I couldn't determine whether man, nature, or some super being had built the twenty to thirty-foot structure that could have been a monument, marking a significant entity.

I stared upward. A feeling of inferiority pressed on me, as if being judged. I pondered at an opening about fifteen feet up the wall of the precipice—an entrance, or just a hole in the rock?

Away from the tower, a mile or so, there flowed a tranquil river, and on the far shore, lush vegetation flourished—trees, fertile slopes, and valleys. Mountains penetrated the clouds. Animals and birds frolicked at the water's edge. Nature's kaleidoscope. The wind blew aromatic scent from that distant bank.

Then, the breeze changed direction, and on this side of the river, a frisky dust devil swirled sand in my face.

The arid basin leading to the monolith, lay dry, red-dirt deprived of nutrients. Why? The earth was hard and cracked like a jigsaw puzzle.

A band of horses appeared out of red bluffs' shadows. They stopped and stared at us. Lightning returned their gaze. Then he turned to me. I read his eyes. He wanted to join them, and sadness filled my heart. I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't own him. Before the dust settled, he became one of them, and together galloped along the river northward and up into a dark, almost black, cloud that began to move my way.

The huge sky-body seemed angry. Flashes illuminated the dark mass like neon in a pitch-black night. Reverberating thunder shook my guts. I felt so alone, trapped in a terrible storm. The monster cloud had intelligence. It wanted to hurt me.

Beyond the river, a clear sky met the horizon. But over me, rain began to fall hard. At the base of the rock-wall, I stooped under a stone awning, felt entombed. Thunderbolts rumbled, snapped, lightning zigzagged above the tower. It rained so hard that in a short time the water rose around my feet. In a fetal position, I remained still for almost a half hour. The storm didn't let go, it spat hail. The wind rose, the pellets hurt me. How could I get away—cliff's opening above me? I must get to it, like a spider, crawl upward along the surface to that hole.

Out of the crevice, I stood, hugged the cliff, grabbing stone niches. Drenched, the wind, rain, and hail hit my back with such force that I screamed. Sluggishly, I inched upward. My shirt ripped open. I scraped, bruised my skin. It seemed like an eternity. Finally, I reached the opening and climbed into a rocky lobby.

Moments later, the storm cloud vanished. Scared, tired, wet, and chilled, I turned and peered into the cave. A throat? Uninvited images stormed my brain. Did the cave contain the corridors of my conscience? Did I dare explore its hallways and mazes?

I turned and stuck my head outside. A lightning bolt struck the side of the entrance. I retreated and understood. I had no choice, the time had come.

Inward, like evil eyes, two openings into caves. I stared. Where did they lead? Would they take me to the core my inner being, discover who I really am? Did I want to know? Deep in my psyche, there were faint, almost forgotten deeds I would've rather not revisit. Was that what I must go through before it's over?

Doubts pervaded my thoughts. My moment of judgment? Who's to be my judge? Did the truth resided in those rocks? I feared to know. I stood still, pondering.

Then, I stepped forward, closer to the entrances. I debated which to enter and could not help but believe that, inside, existed my true self. I shivered as I deliberated. What if I came face to face with my misdeeds—people I've cheated, lied to, harmed, and they know about it, and want an explanation, wanting to know why I did what I did? Was that my final confession, last confrontation with myself?

Standing in front of the right entrance, on uncertain legs, I forced a heavy foot inward. Consumed, somehow, I knew I was about to begin an extraordinary journey.

About twenty feet into the cold, dark, corridor, I saw faint lights at perhaps twenty-five-foot intervals. In near darkness, balancing myself, I felt the pick's rugged marks on either side. In cautious steps, I moved ahead. The ceiling hung less than a foot above my head. An uncomfortable temperature shrouded my body. Deeper into the tunnel, a humid chill stuck to my skin. Feeling of helplessness came over me. A stench seeped up my nostrils, a scent I'd never sniffed before. Organic decay? In twilight, moister glazed the passage. Other than drips, quietude engulfed me. An evil silence?

I concluded that I'd no choice but to wander the catacombs of my soul.