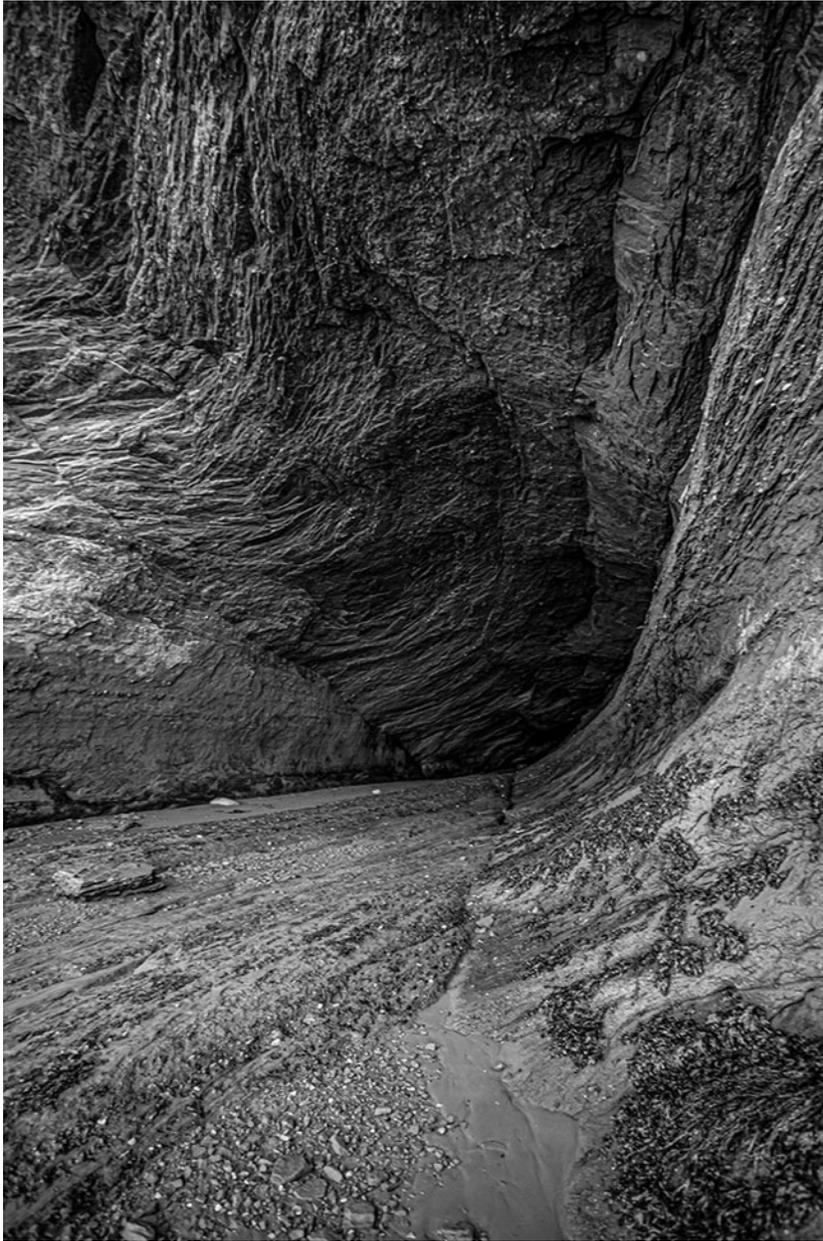


The Existential Adventures of Crazy Man and the Dog, Sidestepper



Episode 66: Wherein Crazy Man and the Dog Sidestepper, enter the cavern that is not a tavern

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If you have not yet arrived at *the light*, then you must still be in *the dark* or *the twilight*, making it essential that you stay on your path or you will wander away from the light. Always keep in mind...there is no detour around the path and there is no tunnel under the path...there is only the path.

“Look!” said Crazy Man. “That looks like a tunnel ahead of us.”

Of course, every self-righteous platitude has its exceptions.

The dog, Sidestepper, squinted his little doggy eyes in the direction that Crazy Man pointed and was amazed to the point that his tiny doggy tail wagged so fast that he left a wake of miniature twisters behind him (which was actually beside him, being a side stepper and all). “That looks more like a giant maul in the ground,” he said. “Maybe we should go around it.” He regretted his words the second they left his mouth as he looked from side to side at the deep dark scary woods ominously lining the path...waiting to devour them.

“You’re both wrong,” said the tunnel/maul in a deep voice that might have emerged from the very bowels of the earth. “But then, you’re both bastards and I have no maps to food and no information about missing mothers.”

Crazy Man was deeply offended by the not-tunnel/not-maul’s assumption that he and the dog, Sidestepper were bastards and was tempted to ask for scientific proof of bastardness, but he feared the answer might conjure a hellish ocean of new questions.

“So,” said Crazy Man tentatively, “if you’re not a tunnel and you’re not a maul...what are you?”

Much to the chagrin of the traveling duo, the not tunnel/maul answered in astonishingly awful verse:

“I am the cavern that is not a tavern
I have no beer, I have only fear
But the path runs through me
And you’ll need a key
If you want to get out of me”

Sorry that he asked and fearing more astonishingly awful verse if he asked more questions, Crazy Man said, “You’re a bastard as well but seeing no way around you, I guess we’ll have to go through you.”

“Good for you,” said the cavern that is not a tavern. “I don’t want to discourage you or anything but once you enter me, there’s no turning back.”

“And if we do?” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“Then you’ll die,” said the cavern. “But I wouldn’t worry about that. Just stay focused on the legion of soul-sucking horrors you find as you travel through me.”

This did nothing to encourage Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, and Crazy Man risked another question: “And what if we turn back now...before we enter?”

“Then you’ll have to face all the soul-sucking horrors you’ve already encountered,” said the cavern. “And then you’ll die.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a choice either way,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “Are there any other options...something along the lines of no soul-sucking horrors forwards or backwards?”

“Just one,” said the cavern. “You can die right here, now. You’ll save a lot of time and agony.”

“We’re in no hurry,” said Crazy Man quickly. “You said something about a key.” He pulled out the furry keychain with its mystery key and held it up to the cavern. “Will this key do?”

“Yep,” said the cavern. “That’s one fine key. You could lose the fur though.”

“But what do I do with it?” said Crazy Man.

“Maybe you should just put it away,” said the cavern, “before you lose it.”

“But does it fit a door or something?” said Crazy Man. “You said we’d need it to escape from you.”

“No!” said the cavern. “Just one darnn minute! I said ‘get out of me.’ Not escape. I’m not that which you *escape*...I’m that which you *get out of* fella.”

Crazy Man was about to ask what the difference was but decided that his mind might not survive the answer, so he pulled the fur off the key chain and offered it back to the dog, Sidestepper, who said, “Um...no thanks. I don’t think I need that anymore.”

Crazy Man stared at the fur for a fuzzy amount of time and let it drop to the floor of the cavern.

“Hey!” yelled the cavern. “Do I come to your place and drop fur on your floors?”

Crazy Man blushed. He’d never been yelled at by a cavern before and wasn’t sure what to do, but no way was he going to apologize to a big hole in the ground. He bent down, picked up the fur and put it in his pocket along with the key and the key chain.

“What kinds of soul-sucking horrors can we expect?” said the dog, Sidestepper.

For just an instant, it seemed as though the cavern caught its breath, but of course we all know that caverns can’t breathe, even in that existential world breathing over our shoulders.

“Things beyond the imagination,” said the cavern as it continued seeming to breathe. “Things for which there are no dictionary definitions, no Wikipedia entries, no results on Google searches and no place in the sane world.”

“Can you give just one example?” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“Imagine your big toe being run over by a train,” said the cavern, “while Shepard’s pie with peas is being forced into your mouth by giant venomous spiders dressed in outrageous clown costumes.”

Crazy Man’s eyes rounded like plain white no-name plates with tiny black holes in the center. He swayed uncertainly and collapsed face-first into the path of adventure and new meanings.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned the Shepard’s pie with peas?” said the cavern.

“That *was* a bit harsh,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “But if you don’t mind an off-topic question...you wouldn’t happen to be my long lost mother disguised as a cavern, would you? Just checking.”

“No,” said the cavern. “I’m not your mother and you’re still a bastard and so is your friend.” The cavern seemed to hold its breath for an instant, even though we’ve already determined that this is impossible. “But I’m kind of a bastard as well, so you’re welcome to continue through me on the path of adventure and new meanings and enjoy all its horrors.”

At this point, all movement, sound, thought and potential movement paused, waiting for Crazy Man to wake up from his fear-induced sleep, pull his face out of the ground and stop being such a wuss. Imagine a snail running away from a vacuum cleaner. That wasn’t exactly how long it took, but he finally came to and pulled his face out of the muck trying to avoid looking at his big red shoes, but he was awake and his face was free, though dirty as hell.

“Where was I and do you have a map to food?” he said to the cavern.

“Nope,” said the dog, Sidestepper. “And it looks like we’re still bastards. But the cavern is also a bastard, so it’s going to let us pass through.”

Crazy Man had long since forgotten why he’d passed out and he was good with the plan: Walk through cavern, use key, leave cavern, find food and mother. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m good with that.”

“Good,” said the cavern. “Now, just a few rules, tips, warnings and implacable advice.” The cavern paused for a moment. “Look both ways before you cross the street. Don’t talk to strangers. Don’t stick metal objects in electrical outlets and never piss into the wind.”

Crazy Man and the dog, Sidestepper, stared at the cavern.

“Is that it?” said Crazy Man.

“Hmm...let me see,” said the cavern. “Eat an apple a day.”

“Got a map to those apples?” said Crazy Man.

“I just give the advice,” said the cavern. “You have to find a way to follow it. Bastard.”

“You’re a bastard too,” said the dog, Sidestepper.

“And you’re a bastard,” said the cavern.

“The whole world’s a bastard,” said Crazy Man and, on that note, the two followed the path of adventure and new meanings into the deep dark scary cavern.

To be continued...

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