



**TALES**  
FROM THE

# LIMINAL

S.K. KRUSE

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# The Ferryman and His Brother

*an excerpt from*

Tales From the Liminal

*by*

S. K. Kruse



DEUXMERS



## THE FERRYMAN AND HIS BROTHER

**H**E'S MY BROTHER, BUT HE NEVER LETS ANYONE KNOW it. Since it doesn't make much difference for most of the passengers, I don't usually bother to clarify. They've got enough on their minds. Regrets and whatnot. If they've got a lot of them, their crossing will take a long time, and if I distract them with irrelevant matters it might take even longer, so I just let them do what they need to do in peace and quiet, and I focus on getting them safely to the other side.

I take a different approach though when one of the imperious types comes aboard, humbled not even by the circumstances that brought them to me. In these cases, I make sure they know. Of course, my brother can't do anything more to them, and on some level they know that, but there's still psychological resonance from their recent experience with him, and, because his personage has reigned so mythically over their lives, just letting them know we're related is usually enough to silence their demands, lower their chins, and put them in the frame of mind they ought to be in, lest their crossing drag on needlessly. My brother says I don't have to do this. Argues that I shouldn't. Says it's not my place to remediate their suffering. He might be right. But I don't do it just for them. I do it for me too. I do not look forward to dreary, drawn-out trips across the river.

I never tell the children, of course. They're already a little frightened. Not entirely sure what's happening. They look up at me with searching, innocent eyes, hoping I'll explain things to

them. As I said, I'm just supposed to ferry them, but for the littlest ones—even though the trip will be short, luminous, and immediately revelatory—I tell them they're about to embark on the greatest adventure of their lives.

Again, my brother doesn't approve. But I don't approve of some of his methods either. We used to fight all the time over how each of us ought to do our jobs but that was eons ago. Now we mostly just let each other do our jobs the way we see fit, though there are some lingering grudges and disputes.

For example, over half of everyone who comes to me brings some sort of payment, but I've never taken bribes and I never will. Somehow, though, this myth persists. I suspect my brother perpetuates it. His gothic tendencies have never abated. He says it's the job, but I know he relishes the art and poetry devoted to us—well, mostly to *him*—and he likes to keep the ancient stories fresh.

Since I have no practical use for the coins, I throw them into the river. There are hundreds of millions by now. Probably billions. No sunlight ever makes it down here to the underworld, of course, but some of the passengers shine so bright that, on their crossings, it looks like we're floating on a river of silver and gold. Unfortunately, those luminescent trips are the shortest but, even so, it's gratifying to collaborate in some small way in the creation of such radiant beauty, however fleeting, and to offer this small gift—a little something special from the ferryman—to the ones who shone brightest up top.

Passengers try to bribe my brother too. He takes their payoffs but only in cases where he wasn't really coming for them. He has no real say, after all, in the time he is to collect them. I've told him thousands of times it isn't fair to take bribes, but he claims it puts some of the pre-passengers at ease.

My brother can't stand it when pre-passengers try to cheat him though. He claims no one has ever succeeded. I think he's probably right, but I could never stand it when he gloated over it. For millennia, he enjoyed recounting the fates of Sisyphus and

Gilgamesh and, for a while, all he could talk about was Count Dracula. I'm sure he would get a lot of laughs out of the billions of dollars pre-passengers spend on vitamins and herbal supplements these days, if the last century hadn't so thoroughly destroyed his *joie de vivre*.

Yes. I'm afraid it's true. The work has worn him down. You would think the years would have made him indifferent, but they haven't. My brother has become cynical. Quite possibly, is going mad. From the very beginning, he had trouble with the killings—with all the ways there were for humans to die in the natural course of things, he couldn't fathom why they actively added to the means and ways of death by killing one another. I'm never up there in the world so I can't imagine what it would be like to witness that day in and day out, millennium after millennium, but, I tell you, it has changed my brother. He used to be so full of life—no bad puns intended—eager to be up there and part of it all—to see and discover, to watch as it all evolved. It was, in fact, the very reason he fought me for it.

As the older brother, it was supposed to be *my* job, but he wanted it so badly. For over a century, we wrestled for it, but, being equal in strength, neither of us could prevail. At first, I fought him on the principle of it. I was the older brother, and it was my right to take the best job, up in the world where everything was happening. But after a couple of decades of grappling and sweating, of takedowns and reversals, of tearing our way through the underworld, I began to wonder if I might not like it better down here, where the water ripples meditatively along the riverbank, where the drama of existence is already spent and only its echoes are ever heard. Eventually, I decided to stop fighting him for it, and we took up our respective roles. I still remember how he smirked as he donned the cloak and took the scythe from me, convinced he had secured for himself the better part.

But the last century almost did him in. He was so overworked at some points, I thought the exhaustion alone might overcome him. The real problem, though, was the killing—killing on a scale

he'd never seen before. And, of course, my brother has seen everything.

It was during the first Great War when I first noticed the change. He developed an alarming sarcasm and would make caustic remarks, sometimes mocking the passengers, sometimes mocking the work. During the Great Purge, he became depressed and didn't say much of anything at all. Then the Second Great War hit. That's when I first began to fear my brother was going mad.

He started hanging around the dock after making a drop, shouting absurdities that both confused and terrified the passengers as I ferried them across the water. It was always something along the lines of, "You know it's because the gods are jealous of me! That's why they gave you the sweet ferryman gig and me the job of trash collector! You're no threat to them! Don't you see, brother, the gods fear me! They're trying to crush my spirit with the corruption of humanity! Eviscerate me with their villainy and vice!"

Sometimes, when we'd still be on the dock preparing to embark, he'd seize a passenger who'd taken the life of another, pull them close to his terrible face and, snarling and smirking, say things like, "When you get out into the middle of the river, where the fog is thickest and the water darkest, my brother's going to dump your waste of a life overboard and let you drown in the cold, murky waters of Old Styx—*eternally*." To avoid a scene, I would wait until we departed and then assure the threatened passenger that everyone was due a crossing, no matter how long it took, no matter how undeserving they might be.

During the Great Leap Forward, things really began to deteriorate. My brother took to pacing the riverbank when he knew that he was needed immediately and in multiple locations up top. He would sometimes shout, sometimes mumble, but would always repeat the same phrase, "It's only a matter of time ... it's only a matter of time ..."

"Until what?" one of the passengers once dared to ask.

"Until the next great war!" my brother roared, scythe raised,



arms of his cape flailing in the wind, his crazed, yellow eyes flashing forth from his hood.

I understand his struggle. I'm not indifferent to the horrors. I feel bad for my brother. I feel bad for the passengers. In fact, the less the passengers glow, the worse I feel for them. What thoughtless, petty, or blatant shades of selfishness these dim vessels must have daily indulged in to arrive in such a state of ashen shadow. To have lived a life with such little light! It is unfathomable to me, down here guiding this ferry through the interminable twilight that hovers over Old Styx, that passengers would not have generated every bit of light they could while they still had the chance.

The long, gloomy crossings are not the worst part of the job, however. Sometimes, I get a black hole. A passenger who sucks in even the dim gray light of the netherworld, turning the journey across the river into a harrowing, unremitting night of impenetrable darkness. It's those times I wish I hadn't given my brother the job up top. I suppose I don't really know, though, whose job is more trying. I don't really know what it's like for him. I've never had to stand by and witness the genocide of entire peoples, simply there to collect the dead, powerless to stop the slaughter. But he doesn't really know what it's like for me either. To be held captive for endless ages to the moans and cries, to the teeth-gnashings and wormlike writhings of these black holes that perpetrate such dark deeds. He has no idea the toll these passengers take on me—he is too consumed with his own experience of them.

"You have no idea what I went through to get this one down here!" my brother once cried toward the end of the Second Great War as he shoved a passenger onto the jagged rocks at the dock. Without even looking, I could tell it was one of the black holes. I could feel the cold emptiness curling in on itself. Its power to devour just beginning its long, painful dissolution. My brother grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Millions, brother ... millions and *millions* ..." he whispered. I could feel his hands trembling. Could see his wild eyes in the

depths of his hood. “All the way down here, they just kept appearing—crying out—reaching for us—accosting us—and they blamed *me*, brother—*me*—right along with *him*! How could they think it was *me*!”

I looked down at the murderous dictator lying at my feet and shuddered at the passage that awaited me. I tried to assure my brother, “They’re just scared and confused—he’s killed so many so fast. They just need you to pick them up and bring them to their rest. Once they get to the river, they’ll begin to find peace. They will understand your role.”

He began to shout, “I can’t do it! I can’t go back up there and bring them all down here. I can’t do it.” Then he raised the scythe over his head and hissed at the man at his feet, “I won’t!”

“He’s already dead,” I reminded him, but he brought the scythe down anyway, slashing it, over and over again, through the passenger’s vast emptiness, until at last my brother was spent and the scythe hung limp at his side.

I laid my hand on his shoulder. “They’re waiting for you, brother,” I reminded him as the passenger writhed on the ground with haunting, echoing moans. “You have an important job to do—perhaps the most important job in the whole world—even if you’re misunderstood and unappreciated sometimes. You must go and do your work, brother.”

He sighed but then, after a bit, headed back to the passengers waiting for him up top.

That was possibly the longest trip across the river I’ve ever experienced. I can’t say for sure—there are a few others in the running. But when they’re bleak and protracted like that for a passenger, they’re bleak and protracted for me. In those long, tormenting trips, I lose track of time. I lose track of everything. Of myself. My purpose. The meaning of it all. Of meaning itself. The wailing and gnashing of teeth become my only reality, and I must reach deep into the recesses of my being and try to recall the light. Sometimes, I can only conjure up a solitary coin sparkling in the light of some gentle soul. But I hold onto it. Fixate on this

single point of light holding out against the darkness. I make it my North Star, and I find my way through. I tried again today to explain this to my brother.

“You have to find the light!” He was having a particularly bad morning and was sitting on the bank, rocking back and forth, hands over his face, scythe sinking in the river. I reminded him about the coins and how the passengers who burn bright make the river sparkle. “You must think of things like this that you can hold onto when it’s all too much. Surely, there are such things that you witness in your side of the work?”

He said nothing at first, just kept rocking and emitting long, quiet moans. Finally, after further encouragement, he offered half-heartedly, “Well, sometimes, there are passengers who give up their lives for others—remember that guy last week from Tabuk?”

“Yes!” I said. “He made Old Styx sparkle like a river of diamonds! That’s good, brother, that’s really good!” After more prodding, he conceded that there were often other things at the end, too. Kindnesses. Reconciliations. Acceptance.

“You must focus on *every* ray of light, brother, no matter how small,” I enjoined him.

He nodded, but I’m not sure he was convinced. I wish I could have just let him sit there on the riverbank—sat there with him as brothers, side-by-side, in a much-needed respite, but we didn’t have the time. The longer we sat, the more the passengers piled up for the both of us. I pulled his scythe from the river and got him to his feet.

“You must be strong, brother,” I said, gripping his arms tight, “and you must always remember to look for the light!” He nodded, and though he couldn’t quite raise his eyes to mine, he turned and headed back up toward the ridge.

As I got back onto the ferry and took up my pole, I looked over my shoulder at my brother, trudging up the rugged terrain to go collect his next passenger. I hoped for his sake it would be a glower. I hoped for his sake it wouldn’t be a child gunned down in some senseless murder, but a benevolent elder, dying in old age,

surrounded by her children and grandchildren, with songs and prayers and a thousand kindnesses. I hoped he wouldn't have to search for the light. I hoped it would be everywhere, in everyone and everything, and he could bathe in it for even just a little while. Let it fill him and renew him and give him strength for another day. Another decade. Another millennium. I hoped for my brother that the next passenger wouldn't be just a glower, but a *supernova*—an explosion of light that could override a thousand manifestations of desolation with just one glimpse of it. I hoped it for him. I hoped it for the world. And as I looked at my next passenger—grim and gray with only the feeblest emanation of light foretelling a bitter crossing through unrelenting gloom—I hoped it for myself.



Sandra Kaye Kruse was born and raised in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, where she attended Catholic school for twelve years. In 1988, she left for the big city to get a degree in English from UW-Madison and launch her writing career. After a stunning debut in *The Onion*, however, she found herself on a twenty-five-year sabbatical to raise eleven children. Since emerging from this truth-is-stranger-than-fiction period of her life, her writing has been longlisted for the John Steinbeck Award for Fiction and has won multiple awards in the National League of American Pen Women's "Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition."

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