

A CUT FROM *DEATH AND THE PUBLICAN*
BY BILL ROGERS

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

Anyways, we was talkin' about my first visit to this pub. Let me tell ya, nobody in creation was more surprised than me when that second life come over me. Here I sits, swillin' down my grog an' chewin' over the general state of affairs when "WHOOSH!" down I goes again, right in mid-swallow. I was back amongst 'em, but everything was different this time.

PUBLICAN

All right, I'll stay on for a bit. I won't leave if there's wind in your sail.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

An urchin kid I turned out that second time, not a well-born, swaddled son of a master ironmonger like before. Nothin' I ever learned mattered a fig. Didn't even use the same lingo. These new words never fit my mouth properly, and me a bit poetical that first go-round. I was well and truly lost.

PUBLICAN

But you're resourceful. Tell me, what did you make of yourself? What did you learn? An urchin's a good place to start, as a rule. There's only up from there. You can't say fairer than that.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

Pour me off another pint and, by God, I will say fairer than that!

(Drinks)

I was a monstrosity: ugly as mortal sin. Children threw rocks to drive me off.

SEBASTIAN

They shot me with arrows.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

Well you would'a loved them rocks, then. But I didn't like 'em one bit. Nothin' I knew from my first life hardened me up to 'em. Here was I duckin' and mumblin' through the grimmest life a man could imagine. I made a half-ass livin' workin' as a roustabout an' sleepin' rough most nights. Then one midsummer's mornin' a wagon axel cracked. They sent me down under to prize 'er up 'cause I was built like a bull. And "SMACK!" Lady Death there whacks me up across the ear hole an' here I am again.

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PUBLICAN

So what did you learn by it? Two lives, so different, you'd have to gain something by the contrast.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

That second life was neither yer ass nor yer elbow to put it plain. It's a funny thing. I can't say I have stories per se about that second life of mine. It left me with loads of impressions but nothing reflective. See, I was a big, thick brick of a lad, an unsculpted lump of rock somebody said. Well sir, unlike me on my first go 'round, I never sought out human company. I was a misfit. But I loved the solitary time when I could be alone out in nature. You know what I think I liked best?

PUBLICAN

What was that?

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

What I think I liked best in all the world was runnin' down hills out in the forest.

SEBASTIAN

Wasn't that risky what with all the rocks an' trees an' uneven bits of ground?

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

I didn't mind them things a bit. I used to tear down hills full bore, the steeper the better. I loved to side-step trees and vault over boulders in full stride, pantin' like a wild pig for a chest-full of wind. That's what I loved best, my body a'fire an' all the world a blur!

PUBLICAN

That's it! Tell me how it felt.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

Birdsong in the spring and the raspin' ice-wind biting through the dead limbs of winter. I craved the senses of the flesh; the rain on my face and the sun in my eyes; the clickin' of insects an' the whine an' moan of sleet. Then when I hit bottom, I'd go to ground with my heart bangin' like a tom-tom an' the sweat gushin' down my back like a river bustin' its banks.

PUBLICAN

So, you were still a poet that second life.

DEATH

Too thick with similies for my taste.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

I couldn't call myself a poet that second life. How can you be a poet if you don't have the words? It'd be like callin' yourself a painter without no paint. Nobody knew me at all and I can't even say I knew myself. Things are different now, here in the public bar. I've got some perspective an' I've got my words again.

SEBASTIAN

Silence is golden.

TWICE-MORTAL MAN

I guess I noticed lots an' lots of things I didn't realize at the time. My head wasn't cluttered up with dreads an' hopes an' aspirations. I think I missed a lot in that first life of mine because I was forever weighin', estimatin', measurin', calculatin', and judgin' things. There was too much of my own head-noise to hear anything else. All in all, though, after two lives lived, I can truly say I'm none the wiser.

PUBLICAN

Well drink up an' maybe you'll gain perspicuity by it. Here, let me charge up your tankard as a token of my amazement. Few tales catch me short after all the stories I've heard behind this bar, but this one takes the cake. Two lives and none the wiser. What a lark.