

The River

(Bruce Springsteen)

I come from down in the valley
Where mister when you're young
They bring you up to do like your
daddy done
Me and Mary we met in high school
When she was just seventeen
We'd ride out of this valley down to
where the fields were green

We'd go down to the river
And into the river we'd dive
Oh down to the river we'd ride

Then I got Mary pregnant
And man that was all she wrote
And for my nineteenth birthday I got
a union card and a wedding coat
We went down to the courthouse
And the judge put it all to rest
No wedding day smiles no walk
down the aisle
No flowers no wedding dress

That night we went down to the river
And into the river we'd dive
Oh down to the river we did ride

I got a job working construction for
the Johnstown Company

But lately there ain't been much work
on account of the economy
Now all them things that seemed so
important
Well mister they vanished right into
the air
Now I just act like I don't remember
Mary acts like she don't care

But I remember us riding in my
brother's car
Her body tan and wet down at the
reservoir
At night on them banks I'd lie awake
And pull her close just to feel each
breath she'd take
Now those memories come back to
haunt me
They haunt me like a curse
Is a dream a lie if it don't come true
Or is it something worse
That sends me down to the river
Though I know the river is dry
That sends me down to the river
tonight
Down to the river
My baby and I
Oh down to the river we ride

"The River" is a song written and recorded by Bruce Springsteen, accompanied by the E Street Band, in 1979. It was the title track of his fifth album, *The River*, and was a hit single in parts of Europe in 1981. It reached #25 in the Netherlands, and reached the top 10 in both Sweden and Norway. Its B-side was either "Independence Day" or "Ramrod", depending on the country.

"The River" was originally intended to be included on an earlier, one-record version of *The River*, tentatively called *The Ties That Bind*. The song itself was recorded at The Power Station in New York in July or August 1979. In the first live performance of the song in 1979, Springsteen cited the inspiration as "my brother in law and my sister". The 2012 biography *Bruce* by Peter Ames Carlin includes an interview with Bruce's sister Ginny in which she plainly states that the song is a precise description of her early life with her husband Mickey, to whom she is still married today. In his 2016 autobiography Springsteen confirmed that he wrote the song as a tribute to his sister and his brother-in-law.

"The River" makes use of a haunting harmonica part, and in some ways is a precursor to the style of his next album, *Nebraska*. The imagery of the chorus and the end of the song were inspired by lines from Hank Williams' 1950 hit, "Long Gone Lonesome Blues". The song's depiction of how economic difficulties are interlaced with local culture also presaged the 1980s popularity of heartland rock:

I come from down in the valley,
Where mister when you're young –
They bring you up to do, like your daddy done

I got a job working construction, for the Johnstown Company
But lately there ain't been much work, on account of the economy
Now all them things that seemed so important –
Well mister, they vanished right into the air

Writer Robert Hilburn described the song as "a classic outline of someone who has to re-adjust his dreams quickly [, facing] life as it is, not a world of his imagination."

Throughout the song the river is viewed as a symbol for the dreams of the future. The narrator keeps his hopes alive even as they realistically begin to fail.

That sends me down to the river,
Though I know, the river is dry.
It sends me down to the river, tonight

In 2015, Springsteen stated that he regards "The River," "Point Blank," "Independence Day" and "Stolen Car" as being "the heart and soul" of *The River* album. "The River", and a few other songs on *The River*, such as "Wreck on the Highway" and "Stolen Car", mark a new direction in Bruce Springsteen's songwriting: these ballads imbued with a sense of hopelessness anticipate his next album, *Nebraska*. Bruce Springsteen himself has noted that "Wreck on the Highway" is one of the songs reflecting a shift in his songwriting style, linking *The River* to *Nebraska*.