

The Skellig Man

I saw a rose once. It was beautiful, and vivacious, and too proud and stubborn for its own good. It grew out of a pile of rocks, half-sunk into the earth. A tiny slit of its stem peeked out and the petals grew wild and large, grazing the sides of that weathered heap of stone.

I watched it stir with the mellow breeze until the sky purpled and bruised into a stunning twilight. I sat with the rose as the heavens opened themselves to men and allowed us to gather a fleeting glimpse of God's home. Time slowed. I listened to the waves crash against the rocks down below. I laid on the hard-packed earth, and with two hands, dug a shallow crevice for my head. The hole was wide and deep enough to cover the back of my wrinkled head, and the strands of hair that I had left nuzzled themselves against the dirt, and worms, and Earth. From here, I could look up at the ebony silken darkness and the few slits of light that crept through the blanket, and still feel at one with the Earth.

My eyelids grew heavy, and I silently drifted off to sleep. The sight of that beautiful rose still clear in my mind.

When I awoke, the rose was gone. A heavy wind had brushed the rock and crushed the stem. The petals flew away with the breeze. So it goes. I still carried the memory of that beautiful rose with me. I clambered to my feet and brushed the dirt and muck from my robes. The wind sent my strands of hair flying, and I tried needlessly and mindlessly to smooth out the hairs that remained. I stepped onto the cobblestone path and followed its winding curves to a rock hut that waited on the horizon. I looked out to my

left and right as I climbed the steps up to the hut, and saw the great, vast ocean that stretched out towards the horizon. Infinite and beautiful.

There was plenty of beauty to be found on my Island. My stony hut that had protected me from the harsher weather that God wrought is a testament to my devotion. I know this. And, because of my solemn vow with Him, he gifts me good fish, and days of better weather, and land brimming with herbs. All that a man could need from life, he has granted me, and more.

All in exchange for my solitude.

This is what Father Gabriel said to me the day he placed me on a wooden boat pointed towards my Island.

The silver cross dangling around my neck was heavy, and I poked and grabbed it as I stepped into my hut. It was cold and dry inside, and the wind whistled through the uneven holes on the walls. The floor was straw and dirt. The straw had been gifted by Father Gabriel on the day I left. I used it to make a floor. The last man who was here, he is long dead now, used the dirt as his bed and covered his face with a twine basket that was now hanging in the corner by my hearth.

When I came to my Island, it was not my Island but his Island, and it had been his Island for some time before I arrived. He had no name, because names did not matter on his Island, and when I gave him my name, he merely nodded and called me “Boy”. He was an old man with weather-beaten hair and a cavernous face that shriveled in the light.

I had paddled for days on a shanty boat made from good timber. There was space enough for me to sit, and for my cargo. I was given a sack of straw, a sack of grains and seeds of a variety at the time unknown to me, a bible, a fishing rod, and a cigarette wrapped in a bag to keep from getting wet. There was also a photograph, secured tightly against my left breast, the image of which I cannot remember but I knew it brought me happiness at some point, and sadness at others.

After a day of paddling, and a night of sleeping, I finally came upon his Island in the morning of the next day. The sun was slowly rising and silhouetted against the blaze was a lonely rock in an ocean of nothingness. As I drew closer to it over the course of the day the rock grew bigger, and the sun flew higher into the sky. When I was not so far away, I saw the old man perched on a rock staring out into the vast, endless ocean. He finally spotted me as I beached my raft on a thin strip of sand. He slowly, and deliberately stood from his rock and disappeared

The old man reappeared later on the shore. His robes billowed gracefully in the wind, and rippled like the waves on the ocean. He walked up to me as I was heaving the sacks of grains and seeds from the boat and onto the sand.

“Hello.” He said. His voice was carried like a whisper on the wind.

I threw the sack of straw onto the sandy shore, a puff of sand rising beneath it. I kneeled, digging my knees into the sand. “I am Brother...” I knew my name once, but that time was long before now. “I have been sent by Father Gabriel.”

The old man nodded his head languidly. “I see.” His face was still and expressionless.

He motioned for me to rise, and I did so.

“Gather your things, boy.”

I scooped up my sacks of grain and seed and straw and followed the old man up an uneven set of stones. He brought me to a barren patch of land with a woven basket in the center.

“Set your things here.” He pointed to a dry patch of dying grass besides the basket.

He waited patiently as I set my things down. There was no hurry to do much of anything.

We walked in an unbroken silence around his Island. It took only a short while, and he often stopped at patches of dirt and grass, and heaps of rock and stone. We hiked up a mound of rocks in worn sandals and came upon eight wooden crosses that had been set neatly into the Earth. Beside the crosses was the rock that the old man had perched on. I examined the crosses through squinted eyes. They were of diverse types of wood, and the ones furthest from me looked rotted and worn while the ones closest to me looked to be made of good timber.

I turned to ask the old man a question, but he had already started down the mound.

I followed him down the rocky incline, pricking my feet on the jagged rocks which he walked gracefully past. “Wait.” I said.

He continued without heeding my words and stopped at that barren patch of land which I believe he called home. He sat down beside his basket, grabbed its handle, and placed it gently over his head.

As I approached him, he called out to me. “Boy, you have many questions.”

“I do.”

“Sit with them for a while. Think of them. You will have three opportunities.

Three questions, to lay here before me.”

“Only three?”

The basket atop his head nodded.

I prayed for some time before I started a fire in the hearth. It was starting to grow cold, and the fire crackled and warmed me nicely. The smoke wafted out of the chimney in thick plumes, up high towards the clouds and God’s kingdom. I grabbed my fishing rod and basket and went down to the thin strip of sand.

I set the basket down on the sand and undressed. I placed my robes in the basket and waded out into the sea, letting the cool water slowly envelop my body. I sat down in the water, my buttocks grating against white sand. I was cold, and the wind had grown voracious as the day had gone on. The water looked to be crystalline and there was a sense of serenity on the waves. I cast out my fishing line and waited patiently.

I saw a bird once. It was wild, and free, and flying high over our heads. The bird could have gone anywhere, towards the places that I have been told lie just beyond the horizon. Yet, this beautiful, majestic, and free creature came to his Island.

I smile at the thought of that.

The old man and I had walked down to the sandy strip and watched the waves lap against the shore and retreat to the ocean. I had only been there two days but he seemed to grow quiet, somber, as if he was completely at peace.

“I would like to build a hut.” I told the old man. My sure steps kept at an even pace with him. Our footsteps indented clearly on the sand before being washed away with the tide.

The old man nodded his head. “Why would you need a hut, boy?” He asked me.

“To protect me.”

“I see.” The old man stopped and looked out towards the sun's reflections on the waves. “What do you need protection from?”

“The rain and the wind.”

“What of the stars? The beautiful wind that sings through the air? The salt and the sun?”

“I can always step outside.”

“But will you?”

“Of course. Why would I not?”

“That is your first question. And the answer is this: I would not step outside.”

I sunk my head, and watched the sun begin to dip down beneath the horizon. Careening delicately below the calm but rising torrent of water.

I turned back to look at him. “I will build the hut.”

The old man merely shook his head. He grasped my shoulder with his hand. It was calloused and rough. I saw cuts, warts, and dead skin. I turned from him to look back out towards the water

I had caught four fish and threw their flopping bodies into his basket. They had ceased flopping by the time I had returned to my hut. So it goes. It was dark out, and the wind was gathering outside. The fire was still glowing dimly in the hearth when I had returned, an orange haze against the stone walls. Thin shafts of lights poured out from the holes in the wall illuminating my humble hut like an orb. I poked at the flames and feed it more straw and sticks to keep it healthy, before skinning and throwing a fish into the heart of my Island.

I watched the orange-red flames dance and flicker in the darkness, licking the stones and fish with a warm radiance. After a short while, I took the fish out from the hearth and bit into it. The other fish watched with glossy eyes from the bottom of the basket as I devoured their friend, or father, or mother, or brother, or sister. I turned away from their watchful gaze and finished my meal outside.

The old man watched from the top of his rock as I gathered the stones needed to complete my hut. He sat for most of the day and would sometimes walk over to my patch of land, where I was stacking stones, and point at a misplaced rock and whisper “No”.

I did not know if he was helping me or displeased with my progress.

It took me many days to build my hut. Each subsequent day after the first the old man would guide me less and less until he merely watched me work. At night, he would find a place beside my pile of stones and set the basket over his head to sleep.

I wandered around his Island one afternoon, and found the old man laying besides a pile of rocks very much like my own, much larger, pile of rocks.

“Hello.” I said. I sat down beside him. I was staring at the ocean, and the horizon between the ocean and the sky. He was lying on his back, looking up at the deep blue sky above him.

“Do you have something to ask?”

Suddenly, the photograph in my left breast grew heavy. I had forgotten of it’s very existence, but it would not be forgotten, until it needed to be forgotten.

“What do I do with the pieces of a broken thing?”

He was quiet, possibly in deep contemplation.

I looked to him, and watched his still body. His legs were bow-shaped and shriveled, with weak calves and mangled toes. His belly dipped like a plateau, beginning at the ribs that peered through the veneer of his cloth and working to his hip bones that jutted out from a wrinkled pelvis.

He slowly lifted his arm, and I watched his hand, silhouetted against the blue of the sky move high and low with a deliberate steadiness. He touched his hand to his heart. He slid his index finger in a mesmerizing motion, creating the illusion of a cross. And, finally, he meekly pointed up at the sky.

“Glue the pieces.” He said.

“What? Why?” I asked.

“I will give you the answer to that question for free.” He used his frail arms to pin his body and sit up straight. “Broken things are interesting. A new plate has no story. A

plate that has been moved from one place to another, from one son down to his son down to his son, has been chipped and nicked and cracked. One day the son with the plate may grow mad at his son and give him the plate with a piping hot meal, but he may put it down with such force that it will chip its rim. And, later down the long path of life, the son's wife may grow upset. Furious! He will stand beside her trying to console her, and she will grab that chipped plate and throw it at him and it will careen over his head, smash against the wall with incredible force, and shatter into a million dazzling pieces, all while the son's son watches. And the little boy who watched, may brush up the pieces and glue them together, and the plate will barely serve its function. It will not hold food and it will crumble often. His daughter, one day while preparing for dinner, will ask why the plate looks the way it does. No one had ever asked why the plate had looked new. Why did they now care if it was broken?"

"I... I don't know."

"Life is short, but there is time for you to ponder the answer."

I did not understand what he meant, nor did I want to squander my final question on clarifying what he had said. So, I nodded, and thanked him, and begrudgingly stood.

"Do you understand?" He asked, now looking directly at me.

"No." I said.

He breathed in slowly, and gently rested on the floor again. I waited for him to do or say anything, but the sounds of soft snores bade me farewell.

One morning, as I awoke, I found the old man sitting just outside the entrance of my half-finished hut. I dressed myself quickly and emerged from my dark enclosure.

“It is time to learn.” He whispered.

And, learn I did. He taught me to fish, truly and with meaning. To cast out the line, and hold the rod, and remind myself that the rod was an extension of myself. We wandered his Island and picked roots and herbs. He showed which herb went best with the fish, and which quelled an unruly stomach. He spoke often and slowly. Day and Night.

For four days, this was life. Full of wonder, and teaching, and meaning. There was an innate curiosity within myself that, however fleeting the moment had been, was sated.

On the last night, as I prepared to rest for the evening, the old man wandered into my hut with his basket atop his head.

“Come with me.” The old man said, and before I even had a chance to respond, he wandered off into the darkness.

I stood and dressed quickly and followed him out. The wind was wild and ravenous, the sky, a dazzling spectacle of stars, and the heavens. He moved with a grace and assuredness, yet the basket blinded his vision. He stepped over jagged rocks, and walked up the steep incline with a knowing sense. I stumbled often, and scrambled up the incline, and battered my feet against loose stones. But, I finally reached him.

He sat on his rock, a lit cigarette steaming silently between his fingers. The waves crashed beneath our feet, battering his Island. The old man sat still, motionless and

breathless. Beside him, at the base of his rock, was loose bits of wood strewn on the grass, and beside that was a new cross. It was made of good timber.

When I turned back to look at him, he was no longer on his rock, only the basket remained. He stood at the peak, starkly naked, allowing the wind to pepper him with salt and air. The old man turned to me and smiled.

“What are-“ Before I could finish my question, he spoke.

“Is that your final question?” There was a beautiful smile etched across his face. The only smile he had ever let slip from his stone face. He turned away from me again, looking out towards the horizon, and the ocean, and the darkness, and the light.

“No, no.”

“Ask!” He roared above the crashing of the waves.

“Please, don’t go!” I begged and pleaded.

“This is your final opportunity.”

A thousand, million, questions flooded my mind with speed and fervor. My head wanted to burst, and the questions wished for nothing more than to explode out of me. My eyes bulged, and my body wrestled with itself at the prospect of absolute loneliness until it could not fight itself anymore. I fell to my knees.

The old man turned, the cigarette smoking dimly. The flame was nearly out. The darkness of the night was pure ebony. All for the single point of light that stemmed from the dwindling cigarette.

“If life is as short as you say, then why do nights like tonight feel so long?”

He walked over to me, his bare feet stepping on mud and jagged rocks. The old man patted me on the shoulder, and the bleak silhouette of his hand gestured for me to rise.

I did so.

He grabbed me, pulled me close, and hugged me. His naked body felt frail and weak in my hands. A man at the end of his days. His skin was papery thin and wrinkled.

“Boy, I have long sought the answer to that question, and I am no closer to finding it’s answer than you in this moment.” He turned away from me.

He walked to the edge of the cliff side, and the dark outline of his head looked out over the water.

The old man jumped.

I rushed to grab him, grasping desperately at air, but he was gone. Tumbling down into the darkness of the water. I heard thrashing and thumping, scraping, and finally a splash as the silky black water consumed him. I peered over the edge of the cliffside and saw the rocks, and the water, and the faintest glimmer from the tip of his cigarette as it sunk into the sea. I slumped onto the ground and wept.

I wept for days. Mourning the loss of the nameless old man.

I awoke the next morning after eating my fish and wandered around my Island. The weather was calm and serene. I skirted the edges of my Island, basket wrapped around my arm, and collected some herbs and roots. My robes billowed gracefully, and the thin strands of hair that remained on my head danced in the breeze. I went up the incline, where the old man’s rock rested, and saw the crosses. They were older now; the

good timber had ceased being good and now sufficed as just timber. The other, older pieces of wood were rotted and failing, the oldest cross having crumpled and faded away into mangled pieces of wood.

I respectfully touched the old man's cross and lingered beside the other crosses, wondering who these men had been.

I sat on the old man's rock; my rock and gazed out into the horizon. The sun was blazing in the distance, and I squinted my eyes to look out at the waters, and the sky.

I saw a boat once, and a boy in that boat rowing with fervor and tenacity towards my Island. He was a small blip, in a sea of nothingness, silhouetted against the sun. So it goes.