

GRANDMOTHER

It is said that there is a special place high in the mountains above here, beyond the lake where the tourists stop and take their pictures, beyond where even the locals have gone and will continue to go, so long as there are people in this world and so soft long as there is soft grass it in to lie on. Yes, beyond that and further still. It is not the kind of place one simply finds themselves at. One must arrive. But first, one must seek.

Seek what? you ask. It doesn't matter. Everyone is seeking something. If you can endure all the long, lonely nights that lie between here and there, you just might even find what you're looking for.

There was once a man who did just that. A young man, long limbed and still too sharp in the cheeks and shoulders where he hadn't filled out yet, a little too quick to laugh and much too quick to blush. You know the type. They usually travel in packs, not because they need the protection but because they are afraid of being alone. Our young man -- let us call him ours, seeing as how I just made him up and he no one else has claimed him yet -- as traveling alone. He often did, even when he did not carry a rucksack and he did not smell like sweat and stale clothes. There was an air of sadness about him, not particularly offensive and of no apparent source.

So.

The young man -- no he doesn't have a name. Now hush. Do you want to hear a story or not? -- listened when other people talked, in only that way that the saddest of people can be bothered to. What he heard gave him ideas. Dreadful things, ideas can be. You tell me whether or not you think this was one: he had decided he would climb all the way to the top of the mountain and into the hills where there was rumored to live an oracle who could see into the future and answer any question. And that is just what he did. He waved at the tourists as he passed by, smiled and talked with the locals but never for very long. Soon he had left them all behind. He was alone now, but that was nothing new. He kept going.

Like all good stories, this one takes place just as spring was about to turn to summer. Why? Because it's the only time of year people can be bothered to do anything and for it to be believable. But you should bear in mind that spring in the mountains is not like spring here in the valley, and so it was still very cold, especially at night. The young man shivered in his sleeping bag and his clothes got wet with morning dew. Walking faster might have warmed him, but he had to slow down often to look for berries and other edible things because he

hadn't packed enough food. But it was all worth it, because after a week he reached his destination.

It wasn't as he had imagined it would be. Then, very few things are for any of us -- you'd better get to accepting that now, it will make everything else that much easier for you. It was too small, for starters. The hut of an oracle should be at least a little bigger than a bedroom, he reasoned, and I think we can forgive him for this. If I had magical powers, I'd live in a castle with lots of servants to bring me cakes and wine. Maybe that's why I don't.

Anyway. There was our young man, tired, smelly, already a little sad to begin with and now disappointed on top of it all. He knocked on the hut's door anyway. He had come too far not to do this, and so he stepped up to the tiny porch. The door swung inwards at his touch on a single room with a once colorful blanket now faded to dusty tones of blue and grey heaped in the one corner, in the other, a small wood stove. He leaned against the door frame. He had been carrying something with him, something that can't be rolled up into a pack but that had been weighing him down all the same: hope. But hope is a fickle thing, and it can only inspire for so long before it turns bitter and tries to kill you with it. It might have turned on

him right then and there, but then there was a voice behind him that said: "Over here."

The young man turned, not knowing what to expect but knowing that whatever he found behind him would be better than the nothing before him.

The oracle's face was so scored by wind, the body hunched and shrunken in on itself, that the young man could not have said whether they were a man or a woman. It was beyond the point of mattering, really. What use would a person that old even have with the body of a man or a woman -- oh, don't squirm like that; I know you know enough of these things to understand what I mean. But when the oracle smiled it was such a sad, knowing smile that the young man instantly knew this pile of wrinkled flesh and white hair had once been a woman.

She was sitting on a bolder, draped in a blanket that was more moss than thread. It was here before her that the young man fell to his knees. It was here that his strength gave out. Only his hope hung about, wary.

Then the oracle said...what is this now? Is she a *witch*? Do you really know now what an oracle is? Why didn't you ask me sooner? It's...well, I supposed it's too complicated. She can be a witch, I suppose. Why not.

Then the witch said, "You have sought me and now you have found me. What is it that you truly seek?"

"Pain," answered the young man.

"What an unusual request," said the witch, though if she truly found it usual, her voice did not show it. She spoke as frogs do, evenly, with a strength at odds with the size of her body. "Most come to me hoping to be released from pain. Or death. Or any of the other smaller losses."

"But that's just it. I don't want to run from pain, I want to face it. I want to feel it now, all at once."

"You don't know what you ask," droned the witch.

"But I do!" You could be excused for thinking the passion in the young man's voice had anything to do with confidence. It was fear, and it always had been, fear walking hand in hand with hope and sometimes disguised as it. "If I could experience all the pain I am ever meant to over the course of my life, however long or short that may be, if I could just get it all out of the way, then I could be truly free to live. I'm afraid, but I'm not a coward. You say others have asked to you ease pain? I'm sure there are hundreds more who've asked you to spare them from it all together. I'm not asking for that. I can handle it."

Let us imagine for him now a face, our young man. Big eyes, pleading -- brown, I'm thinking, you imagine them whatever color you will. Into this face our -- well, *your* -- witch said: "You do not know what you ask. You think you do, but listen: say I do this for you, so you can experience a life-time of pain right now all at once. What would that life look like?"

"You are out with your friends...No I sense you have few of these. Let us just say that you are out, doing whatever people your age do in this age. You stub your toe, you stove your finger on a door jam, no great loss. You are spared the pain and the moment of inconvenience that comes with it. But what is a moment? For that matter, what is a life? I can see I'm losing you, so imagine this instead:

"You break a leg in an accident in one of those metallic monstrosities people go about in these days. You break it, an easy enough fix these days but you miss the sensations that make the blurred edges of the world sharper. You miss the dread, the hope, of not knowing if and then knowing when a stranger will help you in your temporarily crippled state through a door, a simple thing really but now an obstacle that pain and incontinence has made large?"

"Let us take it further. Let us say that you survive every little inconvenience standing between you and living and make it

to The End. A disease waits there to claim you no matter what you think, especially not what you feel. Pain takes, but all things take. In losing it, you lose that particular shade of azure in the summer sky that is the last. To lose pain, not just physical pain, you lose all its gifts.

"Not all pain is a gift, mind you. The victim need not relish the past to experience the present. There are plenty of reasons to want to avoid pain or loss. There are others to endure it. You are young yet. You have much pain to experience. And much more to be gained from it."

"I'm tired of people telling me that," said the young man. "That I'm too young. That I couldn't possibly know what's best for me and that I should just wait. I'm sick of waiting."

"No one knows what's best, truly. Not even me. I present to you the possibility of one future among many. It may very well be that you will live a life with no greater pain than a few disappointments and rejections. It may be that you fall and break your neck on the way back down this mountain. You have made it this far. I will do for you what you have asked, if it is still what you want."

The young man spent the night by the witch's fire and in the morning, he left without what he had come from. Most did, and were all the happier for it.

What happened to him then? You want me to say he came down from that mountain, free of all his sadness and everything that had ever troubled him? That perhaps on his way down he laid eyes on some farmer's daughter whistling as she worked in the fields and immediately knew that his future lay with her and whatever they could produce between their two bodies and the land? No, I won't do him -- or us -- the injustice of ending his story like that. Let us just say that whatever he did, he loved and hoped and lived a little more deeply than he had before. Let us say that is enough.