

VEIL OF GRAY

There was a drought in Oberamagau that caused a great famine in that land. The sun was so hot it dried up all the rivers except for the mighty Rhine meandering in the east as it flowed north to Kierschein. The farmers and their wives met one night to create a plan to save them all from



starvation. They all agreed to sleep by day under the shade of their roofs until the setting of the sun. In the coolness of the moonlit night they walked for miles and miles toward the river's edge. At day break they worked in unison with focused efficiency. Children caught fish for their mother's to cook while men chopped down trees or carved and shaped the wood into small river boats. Each craft bore the weight of a mast adorned with sails. Their daughters had carted family heirlooms in wagons and now they were busy sorting through the goods along the shore. Everything was to be sold at market in Kierschein. They did this night after night until there was one craft for each first born son. The young men and boys would represent their families as they bartered and bargained for livestock, sugar and grain. Even Jack, the only child of his widowed mother, would venture off trusting village folks to keep his mother alive.

He loaded his boat with the hand carved chest his father had made for his mother as a wedding gift. An ornate frame, carved by the hand of his grossvater who gilded it in gold to display his grossmutter's painting of angels singing as they strummed their harps, was secured inside. These treasures were monetarily valuable and very dear to their hearts. Tears trickled down his mother's cheeks as she said, "Bargain well enough to tempt buyers to bid against one another. Our survival and hope for a brighter tomorrow depends on you my son." Silently she handed over the last of their heirlooms. One set of silver candlesticks, a lace table cloth she crocheted before Jack was born, knitted shawls, a woven carpet and blankets made before her fingers knotted up from arthritic pain.

Finally, after thirty setting suns and rising moons, the people of Oberamagau kneeled along the shore of the Rhine and prayed as each son climbed into their boats. With no wind, the boys had to row against the current as they headed north. Their families walked along the shore chanting to spur them on.

*"Come home to us with nature's feast, replenish our fields with seed.
Bring all we need to end this tormenting spell of misery."*



The teen-aged boys powered their strength into the oars to push aside the mighty flow of the Rhine. To keep up the momentum and their spirits, they sang the jolly tunes yodeled at the annual October wine and beer fete when famine did not wreak havoc on their lives. Many thought God was testing their faith. Others thought they were being punished for the sins of one bad man. However, no one was ever accused of evil deeds.

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By the time night fell, the young men were eager to tie up their boats under the camouflage of weeping willow trees. Still cloaked in the warmth of camaraderie, they shared morsels of food before curling up like bugs to sleep in their boats. Jack, the youngest lad, was the last to settle in. He did not have a man's body and struggled to keep up with each heave and ho of melodic beats. He went to sleep hungry and exhausted. In the morning the others pressed on, racing each other, believing the first to arrive in Kiersheim would reap the best deals. Their competitive natures propelled them on. Jack did his best not to lose sight of their unfurled masts. However, he was famished and stopped to fish.

Seven days passed without wind to fill their sails. But, on the eighth morning, Jack awoke to a wet breeze churning up cold fog into a thick creamy cloud. He couldn't see beyond the rim of his craft. He yelled out.

“Hank! Franz! Curtis! Clyde! Are you still here?”

His voice was snuffed out as if a pillow of lamb's skin was pressed against his mouth. He called out again. No answer. He was alone. He stepped out of the boat with care. He did not want to fall into the river. Fear crept up from his empty belly as silence answered each shout he blasted into the thick veil of gray. He began to feel hopeless and searched for a tree to slump against until the sun melted the fog away. It made no sense to continue without the navigational aid of landmarks.

Sadness smothered his fear as his stomach growled. Just seven days to the south by boat, his people were hiding from the angry sun that made the soil oven hot and scorched clouds desert dry. Well, at least, he had caught two fish on his second day traveling up river, although, nothing since. He was not a fisherman. No matter, he would try again as soon as the fog lifted and the shoreline came into view.

Sitting for more than an eternity, or so it seemed, his mind grew numb. He stared out feeling imprisoned by the opaque fog. He lifted his arm to feel the sensation as he moved. Everything was invisible making Jack's mind dizzy and confused. It was eerie and he wondered if this was how a blind man felt. The veil of fog was creepy, like a shroud waiting for his death before it wrapped him up mummy tight. And yet, he was not afraid, just, frustrated by the gray atmosphere keeping him from his duty. He was determined to fulfill each promise made to his mother. It was horrible watching her suffer. Jack envisioned her lying on the cot too weak to move and staring up at the cracked ceiling of their little blue cottage. His heart ached and tears welled up in his eyes. He began to whisper a prayer.

“Dear grossmutter, release your angels from the canvas and send them off to mother. Ask them, please, to play their harps of gold and sing a holy song to comfort and cheer her soul. Dear grossvater, re-shape your gold gilded frame into father's muscled arms and let them embrace his wife to keep her safe until I return.”

Repeating his prayer over and over until a hymn took form, he stopped fretting about the sun beating down on his mother and the foggy realm pressing him down into the ground until someone, within the depth of the dense mist, jabbed his ribs with a solid rod knocking him over on his right side. He gasped and fear squeezed him like a vise snapping him back to reality. He twisted his torso

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up in a spiral whipping his arms from side to side to hit away or grab the weapon threatening him. There was nothing but thick air.

“You better come with me, you’re trespassing.” The voice was feminine soft and sweet which surprised Jack because the thrust of the weapon hit him hard and it was sure to leave an ugly bruise were it had dug into his skin.

“Who are you,” Jack asked in surprise as he stood up and leaned toward her voice in search of her face.

“There’s no time to explain, they’re coming. We have to get away.”

Jack heard her feet slap against the earth to his left, so, he obeyed the urgency expressed by the patter just as the tail ends of her blonde hair and white dress swished into to view. She was running now and he leapt after her as the ground beneath their feet slanted uphill. After cresting the top they ran at top speed all the way down. The slope was rock-less, the best kind to roll down, or, toboggan on when it snowed. Alas, there was no time for fun. Bright sun rays dissolved the opaque veil into a misty cloud that sparkled like frost. And soon, they reached the border of a lush oasis where the final puffs of fog vaporized from the heat emanating from sunbeams. The oasis was completely surrounded by a hedge as if to keep it secret. In the middle was a giant beanstalk that spiraled up to the sky with no end in sight. The lass began to climb and called out.

“This is the only way out of the haunted land. Hurry!”

They climbed using leaves for foot and hand holds. With each step they rose higher above the land but no closer to the top. Thinking the rest of his life would be spent climbing, his fingers, neck, arms, back, legs and feet throbbed with each exertion. Weary, he did not notice his extremities tingle into numbness until his right hand lost its grip and he began to slide down. With no true sense of space or distance Jack's predicament felt as unreal as a dream. Then, something grabbed his left hand and yanked while something else tugged at the back of his shirt and pulled. Summer-saulting into the air he knew, this time, the end was near. Waiting for the sound of his body to splat like a snowball he became bewildered when his rapid flight eased into slow motion. He began to float and, feet first, he alit on a floor shimmering in hues of silver and gold.

“What is this place,” he asked in awe swiveling his head left then right wishing he had the turning radius of an owl. The world he stood on was made of diamonds, precious stones and glistening metals. When he gazed upon the angelic face of the girl he flushed in embarrassment, his cheeks burning redder than Rudolph the reindeer’s nose. He wanted to see her wings then felt ashamed of his disrespect. He bowed his head and slowly kneeled on the floor in silence. Breathing as quietly as possible Jack waited for her to speak.

“You must save your friends. They’re under a goblin’s spell. Didn’t you know they turn greedy boys to stone? As you sorrowed for your people and prayed for your mother, the others tried to steal what belongs, only, to this world.”

“But what can I do? I have no magic,” responded Jack as he wondered if goblins were as hideous as

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zombies. His shoulders sagged from the weight of worry and his muscles throbbed from the exertion of the punishing trek. He was, after all, just a scared little boy who relied on others for help.

“I did not know goblins were real,” whispered Jack realizing this wasn’t a nightmare he could awake from.

“Goblins are unforgiving. And, if you also dare to steal they’ll turn you into stone just like your village friends.”

“Oh, Angel of God, you must believe me. I would never take what is not mine. I was only waiting for the sun to come out.”

“God? I am a child of Logic and Reason. My name is Wisdom. My brothers are Honor and Dignity. Our little sister's name is Integrity. We are not gods, although, we are immortal. Nevertheless, you have trespassed on sacred land. Mortals are not welcomed in our realm. Now, you must face the Goblin King. Bargain with him if you can. I offer you this warning; speak words of truth, mean what you say, and say it from the love of your heart and the wisdom of your soul. Even simple creatures like you are born with these abilities. If you choose not to heed my words, beware!”

The angelic heroine vanished in one blink of Jack’s eyes. Lightening streaked across the sky and a host of goblins stood on either side of a majestic throne covered in royal blue velvet brocade studded with rubies, emeralds and pearls.

“SIT,” they shouted as they pounded their spears making a sound like a thunder clap. Jack sat back on his calves and bent down from his waist with his hands reaching out flat against the floor as his head sank low between his arms. Then he responded to the command.

“Only a King is worthy to sit on a throne. I am not he.”

A table covered with a cornucopia of delicious food appeared in the same spot where the throne had been. The aroma tortured Jack and he desired to dive on top of the table and shove food in his mouth like a wolf devouring a pig. Not giving into the urge, Jack grew puzzled. How could such an enormous banquet pop out of thin air? Was it real?

“EAT,” the Goblins shouted as they pounded their spears making a sound like a thunder clap.

“I shall not indulge in such a feast until I return to my mother’s side and replenish our own supplies.” Within seconds of Jack’s last word, a jewel crusted chest overflowing with gold coins, gems, pearls, silver plates and goblets replaced the table of food. Like sun rays, a glittering rainbow of color fanned out and dazzled Jack's eyes. It made him dizzy.

“TAKE,” the Goblins shouted as they pounded their spears making a sound like a thunder clap.

“I will not--we will not take what is not ours. We will not sell or trade what is not ours. We did not journey here. We travel to Kiersheim to honor our pledge to our people dying of starvation. We will return with our promises fulfilled. It was never our intent, it was never our plan, it was never our

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desire to trespass upon your sacred land. On the grave of my father, the heart of my mother, and the soul of your King, I swear that I speak only truth.”

The host of goblins pounded the floor with the spears and yelled out, “TRUTH!” In a lightening flash Thorax the Goblin King appeared on the majestic throne of royal blue.

“One thing, only, do I demand of you Jack--from you the boy who almost climbed our magic bean stock. Before I release your friends to follow you in humility and honor you with the respect worthy of a good leader, you must agree to do my bidding without knowing what it is I ask of thee.” The King slobbered and spit as his words lashed out like a whip stinging Jack’s flesh.

“I will do as you say,” said Jack without pause or exhibiting fear.

“Ah, to answer thus is wise and I thank you for granting my niece's one and only wish. All she has ever wanted is to enjoy a kiss from the flesh of a human’s soft, smooth lips.”

Jack had never kissed a girl and it took all his strength to keep his voice from squealing out in shock and his feet from running away from the hideous creature materializing before his eyes. The host of goblins boomed out a chant.

“Only one kiss can break the prisons of stone. Just one kiss from a human’s lips and all may go home.”

Jack stood up straight proudly walking toward the King’s niece while he focused on nothing but her eyes. They shifted in brilliant patterns like the kaleidoscope his father purchased at Nuremberg’s Krist Kringle Mart when he was seven years old. They were mesmerizing, and contrasted greatly with her thick leather lips marred by warts and razor sharp teeth streaked with green mold. Taking his time, Jack inhaled deeply filling his belly and lungs with fresh air. When he began to exhale he pressed his lips against hers. Their mouths parted, and as he continued to exhale the fresh air whooshed into her mouth. Instantly, a foggy veil of gray swirled and spun around their bodies like a tornado. Locked in between ticking-time and the stillness of eternity, Jack, hypnotized by kaleidoscope eyes, felt his arms embrace the goblin girl’s body. He was not concerned. In fact, he felt blessed. Suddenly, the goblin girl’s image shattered like glass to rearrange into different colors and shapes. Within seconds, as if nothing had happened, Jack found himself staring into emerald eyes floating on a freckled face framed with long curly copper hair.



When the veil of gray vanished, Jack's sail was full of wind and he glided south toward Oberamagau while Glendolyn, the emerald eyed beauty, sat by his side playing a harp. Turning his head, he found the other boys sailing in the formation of a diamond. Each boat was filled with bags of seed, grain and sugar, a goat and sheep, a sprig of beanstalk and a wood carved chest exactly like the one his fathered made so long ago. They were filled with household wares, pottery and other useful things human’s need to live a life of comfort. In the distance, jubilee resounded from a trumpet the moment a watchman spotted the boys lowering their sails and rowing ashore with more than an aching heart of hope.

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