Once told, stories take on a life of their own.

The Writer & The Witch

Robin Sloan
ONCE, LONG AGO, A YOUNG MAN WAS WALKING down an old road on his way to the New Capital. Ancient trees leaned in on both sides and cast shadows that dappled his way. He was very ambitious. His father was a farmer, but he wanted to be a writer. He wanted to see everything and try everything—and he was in a hurry to get started.

(That’s how it starts. This is a story that’s been in my family for a long time. It gets told and retold in times of transition—graduations and weddings, births and deaths. It’s not a story you tell around a table; it’s a story you tell quietly, one-on-one, maybe after everyone else has gone to sleep.)

So, the young writer came to a short stone bridge that crossed a narrow river. There was an old woman sitting like a heap of gray rags at the base of the bridge.

“A coin for an old woman?” she asked as he passed. He said nothing and kept walking. “Just a kind word, then?” she called. Again, he said nothing, and picked up his pace.

“STOP!” she said—her voice very different. He turned. The old woman was standing, pointing at him with a long, pale finger. “In such a hurry? Then, in the name of the rock and the ice, I curse you. For every step you take along your path, you will age one year. And then you will die.”

The young writer rolled his eyes. This was not the first time he’d been cursed by a vagabond. He turned and continued on his way across the bridge. But the air suddenly smelled like a thunderstorm. And with every step, he felt it: something inside of him was coarsening and thickening. His heart was hammering in his chest.

He reached the other side of the bridge and there he fell to his knees. Reflected in the river, he saw not the face of a young man, but one twenty years older.

He lifted his eyes. A jet-black crow screamed and spun above the trees. The old woman was gone.

# # #

THE YOUNG WRITER’S FIRST INSTINCT was to run, to outrace the old woman’s words, to put this hallucination behind him.

But it was no hallucination.

He stared at the foreign face in the river. He felt sick and dizzy. He thought of all the things he wanted to do, all the places he wanted to see. It had all been laid out before him, like some magical feast. Twenty steps ago, life had seemed like an improbable blessing. How could something so small and stupid destroy it all? How could he have made such a simple mistake?

He cursed the old woman—the witch—and he cursed himself. He made little strangled sounds of pain and he wept.

He sat there. A step in any direction was suicide.

The sun set and he curled into a fitful sleep. In the night, cold rain fell, and it soaked him through.

# # #

IN THE MORNING, he woke and ate some of the bread he’d brought for the journey. There wasn’t much.

He stretched his arms and legs, which ached more than they’d ever ached before. The young writer was no longer young.

A woodcutter came down the road leading an ox-cart. He slowed in front of the sprawled writer. “Are you hurt or sick?” he asked.

The writer began: “A witch”—and then he paused. There was a choice to be made, and I’m not sure that he realized
The writer glanced over to the river. The water was running fast and dark. He made his choice. He lied:

“I am a pilgrim from far away,” he said, “and I have come to spend my life in prayer and meditation here, in this spot, where the river meets the road.”

The woodcutter frowned and glanced around. “It’s not much of a spot, is it?”

“It is more important than you realize!” said the writer. “Why, there is a spirit in this river that would devour you and your ox, and having done that, it would roam the land until it found your village, and it would eat everyone there, too.”

The woodcutter looked dubious.

“But I have placed myself here as sacrifice to the spirit. And as long as I sit in this spot, without moving, it will be sated. Lend me some branches to make a shelter, will you?”

The woodcutter’s cart was piled high, and the story was settling in. “Yes, I suppose I can spare you some cuttings,” he said. “I’ll even nail them together for you.”

So he built the writer a simple, sloping roof.

“Good luck to you, pilgrim,” the woodcutter said when he started back down the road. “And thank you.”

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THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED were very difficult.

The writer ate every scrap of edible or nearly-edible matter in the radius of his reach. He lured a squirrel into his lap and wrung its neck. Stretching down towards the river, he tried, and failed, to catch a fish with his bare hands. He choked down slimy snails.

He begged for food from passing travelers, but there weren’t many of them, and most passed him as silently as he’d passed the witch.

But with patience, things improved.

When a fisherman came whistling across the bridge, first the writer begged for food. Then he thought better of it, and asked for a hook and a line.

He honed his begging. His survival depended on it, with so few people on the old road. The story of the river-spirit grew more elaborate; now there were images of children whisked away in the night, of whole towns suddenly flooded, and when the water washed away, no one was left.

Slowly, the story was spreading. One day, two monks from a forest temple came out of the trees, eyed him up and down, and then—satisfied—they bowed and left two baskets full of fresh vegetables and dried fruit. It was a feast.

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WEEKS PASSED. The writer’s entire body had shrunken, his legs most of all. They were in danger of withering. He began a regimen of stretching, squatting, and running in place. Sometimes, as he was pumping his legs, he thought of leaning forward, of letting his feet dig in. He would race down the riverbank, grow old and fall down and die, and it would be over. But he couldn’t. Even though its circumference was so tiny, he had a life, and he couldn’t give it up.

He became adept not only at begging, but at trading, too. A cart would clatter to a stop, and he would offer a tiny treasure—a shell he’d snagged from the river, or a decorative band woven from grass and reeds—in exchange for
some material to improve his shelter. Now he had tattered canvas flaps to keep the rain out and a tiny fire-pit, along with a small, dented iron cooking pan.

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FINALLY, HE PAID A PASSING MERCHANT to take word to his father. His father, who had warned him about his ambition. His father, who hadn’t come in from the fields to say goodbye on the day the writer left home.

His father, who came running—running!—down the road days later.

His father, out of breath, carrying a huge brown sack. It was full of seeds: tomato, cucumber, potato, and kale. Mint and rosemary, too. His father, who sat down right there beside him and used his fingers to rake furrows in the black earth. His father, who reminded him what he’d learned on the farm, and explained the seeds he’d brought, one by one, and showed him how to grow a garden in that little disc of dirt.

His father, who took his face in his hands and said, “You look just like me now.” And then, smiling, “You’re a farmer after all!”

His father, who slept there with him, under the stars. Who would not leave his side until the first harvest, such as it was, had come in. Who, even as he returned to the road, because his own harvest was long overdue, was saying: “Don’t forget to rotate your crops, or you’ll wear out the soil. Treat it right, and it’s all you need.”

His father.

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IT WAS MORNING, months later.

The writer woke to find his garden ravaged, all of his food and small treasures stolen. There were footprints in the wet ground. His heart sank. Almost a year of work, all gone. And it had been so easy. They’d taken everything while he slept, there where the river met the road, out in the open, with no walls and no friends.

The writer stood up and brushed off his knees. He crouched in a sprinter’s stance, fingers stretched down to the ground. He flexed his muscles—and pulled up a tiny trap-door. It was his cache: always secure, because he was always sitting on it. There wasn’t much in the shallow pit, but it was enough to begin again. He knelt and massaged the soil of his garden, making it ready for new seeds.

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YEARS PASSED.

The writer was transformed utterly. He had a thick, black beard. He had improved his regimen; now he lifted heavy river-rocks every day, and balanced on one foot with them. He ate a carefully-metered diet of fish, nuts, and vegetables. His body was lean and strong. His eyes were sharp and clear.

But even more impressive than his own transformation was the transformation of the space around him.

His shelter had become a house. It was very small—what use did he have for space?—but it had walls, cleverly engineered with the help of the woodcutter’s son, a carpenter. They could lift up like awnings or shut down tight at night. The wall facing the road even had a door—not so he could leave, of course, but so he could invite travelers into his home and offer them shelter.

He slept not on hard ground but on a thick straw mat that he could roll up and put aside when he woke.

The leafy trees that bowed in around his house were festooned with banners and garlands. The monks from the forest temple made regular visits now. People from nearby villages came, too, offering small gifts in exchange for blessings.
The road was busier; the New Capital was growing fast, and all of its tributaries swelled with traffic. And so benedictions were not all that he traded in. The writer also sold information.

He was, after all, the eyes of the bridge. He knew who came and went, carrying what, and when. Merchants paid him to tally their rivals’ shipments. The secret police in the New Capital paid him to watch for men with northern accents, leading covered carts, traveling by night.

You might be wondering if he was lonely. No; he had friends, monks and merchants alike. He had companionship from time to time, too: liaisons arranged by those merchant friends. Women he paid in gold.

He had carved out a strange little kingdom, there where the river met the road, just beyond the bridge.

# # #

HIS FATHER CAME EVERY YEAR, sometimes several times a year, and his mother too. She brought him fresh-baked bread from home and copies of his favorite books. Then, one day, she came alone, and she told the writer that his father had died in the fields.

His father.

She didn’t return after that, and soon the writer heard that she, too, had died.

His father and mother had lived to be very old, and in their passing, the writer had realized something very important.

His stationary life, his refusal to walk even a step, had halted the witch’s curse. But it had done more than that: It had also revealed the blessing inside the curse, because in all these years, the writer had not aged a day.

The witch’s curse of rock and ice had made him immortal.

# # #

NINETY-NINE YEARS RUSHED UNDER the short stone bridge, and the writer’s life and legend grew together.

The monks sent novices to sit beside him for days at a time, to learn patience, discipline and stillness. Without fail, each novice would grow bored and restless. He would rise to dip his toes in the river. The writer would make him gather firewood, or repair his roof, or carry messages to his merchant friends. Then, when the novice’s master returned, the writer would report: Oh yes, your student sat beside me. His mental endurance is astonishing for one so young.

That same master having done exactly the same thing twenty years before.

Pilgrims arrived from far away. They brought offerings from their homes—gems, heirlooms, spices. They were surprised when the writer smiled and offered them tea. They expected a mossy statue of a man, maybe even literally just a mossy statue. Instead, they found a wiry 40-year-old who gobbled handfuls of nuts and peppered them with questions about the places they came from.

Some pilgrims brought books as offerings, and the writer read, and read, and read. Over the years, he changed his story a bit: This is a river of knowledge, he told travelers. Bring me your books and tell me your stories. I will remember them and recount them to the river-spirit when it grows hungry.

The pilgrims kept coming, so with the help of the woodcutter’s great-grandson, who was an architect, the writer built a library into the leafy trees that bowed in around his house. It was a strange sight: green leaves, rainbow banners and shelves built across the branches, piled high with books.

And finally, the writer did what writers do. He wrote, and wrote, and wrote. He made significant contributions to the new science of naturalism, observing in impossible detail the habits of birds and bugs in his little world. He compiled histories of nearby villages. He wrote fantastic tales, honed through telling after telling, there where the
river met the road, just beyond the bridge, where travelers gathered and gasped in the light of his fire.

He hadn’t moved one step, but he was healthy, at the height of his powers, and he was famous.

And then she returned.

# # #

IT WAS ON A COLD AFTERNOON that a jet-black carriage pulled by two jet-black horses clattered across the bridge and shuddered to a halt in front of the writer’s house. The driver, a tiny toad of a man, scrambled to open the carriage door, and a woman stepped down. She was young. She was beautiful, with pale skin and jet-black hair. And she was angry.

She glared down at the writer, and her voice was sharp: “Who are you?”

The writer said nothing, only gazed up at her. She looked completely different now. Of course, so did he.

Her lips drew tight.

“Do you realize,” she said, “that in a thousand years of curses, no one has ever done this?”

Now, I need to tell you: the writer was terrified. He knew the witch could snap her fingers and bring her curse to a sudden close, or simply cast a new one. She could transform him into a fish or a fern.

But, even so, he rose to his feet. And he bowed low. Time had taught him a few things.

“Oh, I am glad you realized my true intent,” she said. “I asked travelers on this road to tell me their stories, and I imagine you have the best stories of all. Would you care to sit, and tell me a little of what you’ve seen?”

The air smelled like a thunderstorm.

With a crack! her carriage and horses fluttered into the sky, three crows spiraling away. Her driver croaked and hopped into the river.

She sat, and the writer poured two cups of tea.

# # #

NOW, THIS WOULD BE A STRANGE ENOUGH STORY if it ended here: the tale of two long-lived foes who found a quiet reconciliation, there where the river met the road, just beyond the bridge.
But it’s not over yet.

The writer and the witch talked and talked. The sun set and the moon rose.

He told her the tale of the river-spirit and how he’d invented it, on the spot, a hundred years ago. She leaned her head back and laughed—more of a cackle, really, which sounded strange coming from those lips.

She told him about her apprenticeship in the sweltering swamps, learning the art of potions and poisons and honing her talent for transformation.

He told her about the books he’d collected, and about one of his favorite ancient writers, a poet from the north. He even recited one of his poems.

She told him about the time she led an army defending the Old Capital, wearing jet-black mail and a cape of crow’s feathers, throwing lightning bolts left and right.

He told her about his friends the monks and the merchants, and the dinner he’d once tried to organize, inviting all of them. It was a disaster.

She told him about her time in the court of the Old King, where art and music flourished. She told him about meeting the poet from the north in person. “He was entirely full of himself,” she said, and cackled.

The witch was beautiful when she cackled. And even in this young form, there was a depth to her eyes: tiny crow’s feet that betrayed all the things she’d done, all the places she’d seen.

The writer was sharp and attentive, and he held court like a king in his tiny house.

A very strange thing happened that night, there where the river met the road, just beyond the bridge.

The writer and the witch fell in love.

# # #

THE WITCH MOVED IN, which strained their relationship at first, as it usually does—but even more so in this case given the size of the writer’s house. And he felt self-conscious about his strangeness—which is to say, he felt young again.

With gold he had saved over the years, he paid the woodcutter’s great-grandson to build an addition, with space for a closet, a kitchen and a witch’s workshop.

The witch was not always beautiful. Some days she was the young queen; some days she was the old crone. Some days she inhabited a spectral in-between space, and the air smelled like a thunderstorm and her black hair floated up over her shoulders as if she was underwater. She would go wandering up and down the banks of the river on those days, and she would scare people, because they thought she was the river-spirit come to steal their children away.

One afternoon, the writer finally spoke the silent question. The witch looked away, and softly said: “I cursed you in the name of the rock and the ice. It cannot be undone.”

The writer and the witch were happy together. I mean, really happy. He taught her patience, thoughtfulness, and how to make soup from grass, nuts, and river-rocks. She told him more stories—stories far stranger than the ones he’d heard that first night, stories you would never believe, if it wasn’t a witch telling them by the light of the moon, curled up next to you on your thick straw mat.

She made the writer realize he had been much lonelier than he’d been willing to admit, there where the river met the road, just beyond the bridge.

They had a baby.
THE WRITER’S SON WAS PLAYING with snails on the bank of the river, within sight of the house. The boy was very small, just two years old.

The writer was watching him fondly—that’s what he did most of the time, watched his son fondly—and daydreaming about all the things he could do, all the places he could see. It was all laid out before him, like some magical feast.

There was a dark shape in the water.

At first the writer thought it was a fish, but it didn’t move like a fish. It wove its way through the water like a snake. It was aiming straight for his son.

He called out to him, but the boy didn’t hear. Or couldn’t hear. The air was heavy and damp. Something strange was happening.

The shape was closer now, and it lifted its head up out of the water. A giant, leering serpent’s head, with deep black pits for eyes.

It is important that you know the writer did not stop to think. He did not stop to calculate the number of steps it would take to reach his son.

He simply leapt to his feet and raced along the riverbank. The first steps he’d taken in a century, and each one was a gallop.

Every stride carried the weight of years and fell across his back like a hammer. He left his house a middle-aged man and by the time he reached his son, his beard was white. He placed himself between the boy and the serpent, and the thing struck him. It was huge. With unnatural speed and strength it wrapped itself around his body and it squeezed.

He struggled and pulled at it, and with each stumbling step, another year jolted through him. His joints tightened and his heart pounded in his ears.

He fell to his knees, but he got his hands around the serpent’s neck. It was a shocking sight: the monster’s mouth, yawning wide with rows and rows of jet-black teeth, and below it his shaking hands, white as paper, thin as bones. He leaned and swung with every shred of strength he still possessed, and he bashed its head against the river-rocks, again and again.

The serpent loosened its grip, and died.

The witch was there now, cradling their sobbing son in her arms. She bent low over the writer. He was very, very old.

“My love,” she wailed.

The writer said, softly: “So there was a river-spirit after all. That monster was probably as old as I am.”

“You saved our son,” the witch said. She squeezed his hand. She could barely make words. “My curse…”

“No, no,” he said.

His voice was very faint.

“All blessings.”

IF YOU PASS THAT SPOT NOW, where the river meets the road, just beyond the bridge, you will see that the tiny house is still there. The additions have fallen away, and the garden is no more, but the main structure still
stands, and so do the strange shelves in the leafy trees that bow in around it. They're filled with books, which people borrow or steal. Sometimes they leave new ones, too.

In one of those books, you’ll find the story of a boy, the son of a powerful sorceress, who grew up in the court of the New King. He went on to roam the world, hiking the rocky northern reaches and sailing the warm southern sea. He was, variously, an explorer, a pirate, a diplomat, and a poet. He had one of the all-time great lives.

Inside the house there is a statue of a man sitting—yes, it really is a statue now, covered with moss. Its form is lean, and its face carries the rough shape of a beard. Its eyes are closed, and there is a smile playing on its lips.

Pilgrims still come from far away to seek his blessing. He is the keeper of traveler’s tales, patron of the patient, and protector of small children.

And all who pass know they must slow and say hello. Here, no one hurries along the path.

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