

DORA

A novel
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Chapter I

Well, it's a good question. When I was a squiggly, a little 'un, I wouldn't have thought to ask or seek an answer. But here I be, going on 60 and no more knowledgeable, and I have to have an answer. Now don't you be judging me. I never looked askance at ye nor questioned your ways, strange as they've been at times. I must go and that's all there is.

How and afar and away is the edge out there, that I do ask. No one can tell me. Going on two years now I've asked everyone that came my way. How and afar and away, sir? But not an answer that made any sense to me, and the question now is like to drive me mad. I've had answers that sounded as though they came from books, all lengthy on the word and considered in the delivery, but the meaning was lacking. They spoke of angles and angels, straight lines, curvature (I have all these to memory), the bouncing of light, dust clouds, pivots, dendrons and what have you. They did not deliver to my ear, to my heart.

Being a country woman as I am, I have looked upon the edge every day, every working hour of my life. Am I going to hearken to a word that does not ring with me right? There have been those would fair pontificate at me, determine the ground right out from under my feet, but I, being a solid sort, have held my own. They have even pointed in books to me, not that I can read, and very solemnly too, declaring to this god and that. But in my gut I can tell you it's going to take going there myself to see.

So I've packed. I may as well be plain about it. You may not see me more. The childs are grown and on their own searches. I must be off. And of course I am sad you old one. I shall miss you and your scruffy, gruffy ways. I would you'd come along. But no you say and no it is. And I won't stay. I'm taking only what I can carry easy and the half of the savings we've made for just this what they call "our old age". You'll readily merit that half is mine. Look after the chickens if you be staying on, the donkey, cow, old dog, and

the pigeon coop. If you be going yourself, find them a good keeper. I will send you signs if I can.

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She was stiff. Not used to sleeping outdoors any more, she rose slowly, holding onto the trunk of the tree she had slept under. “Creaky ain’t you, me old dear”, she muttered as she gathered up twigs and some small branches to light up the fire built the night before and still smouldering under its blanket of damp leaves. The old tin pot she took out of her raggedy pack was black with soot from other fires. “Just a little cuppa to get us going,” measuring out a small bit of tea from a rag bag into her cup. She sat down to wait for the water to boil, took out a clay pipe from under her shawl and after poking at it with one finger, lit it up with a twig from the fire.

She’d been moving fairly steadily for two or three months. She couldn’t remember exactly. Sometimes it seemed more, sometimes less. Days when the light was fair, early mornings, a breeze and shade trees to keep off the sun, good water and some food left, the time went easy.

What was it she’d been thinking? There were bees in her brain sometimes. A few puffs on the pipe. “Old one, I do miss you.” There were times sitting by a fire in the mornings when she could easily have turned her back on her travels and headed for home were it not for knowing she’d only leave again. “The old man’ll be down the barn with Nessa right now.” The ache in her breast. Surely she’d been a fool to leave. He’d tried to talk her out of it. She could see the hurt of him. But he’d always known when to stop, when it was no use. And he had stopped.

But he wouldn’t come along, stubborn as she in the end. They had sat that last night together, silent as they had been for years before the fire, sharing the pot of tea. There was no need of speaking. They had finished that. He had put his hand on her head and stroked the fine bits of wild hair that always escaped the pins.

She turned to smile and caught the fear in his eyes and the sadness. He could have had her stay at that but he would clam up

and turn away. And Dora had stopped trying to pull him out of his stubborn silences long before. They spent the last night tight in each other's arms, but there was no going back.

It was harder than she'd expected, this travelling, and she not young. But it must be, so it must. She could never rest at home now. She'd go mad with wondering. "So I, I am here with you my dear, nearby or no. And I have inklings and I will send you mindnotes of my discoveries." She had walked steadily toward the setting sun ever since leaving home.

Her pipe had gone out. The water boiled madly in the little pot. She reached over, hand wrapped in an edge of her skirt, lifted the pot from the fire and poured the bubbling water over the tea in her cup. There was a lump of hard bread somewhere in the pack lift it out and dip in the tea. Better, much better.

After a while she stood up, held out her arms toward her direction and called with all her might as she might have called a lost child at home. In her mind's eye a high bird soaring west, west, toward the mountains there that she knew she must cross in a few days. She stamped her foot, not ever knowing quite why she made these movements, but that they felt right for seeking what she wished. Soaring over the mountain the bird wheeled and wafted on an updraft higher yet, seeking with a keen gaze the shimmering place where the land became dream. Calling again with a wild note, she brought her arms down and the bird to her heart.

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Later, sitting under a tree in the sunpartial shade, she takes time to bring her vision into focus. Where she sits a meadow slopes gently down to a small river. The sound of water, the sun warm on her, the flickering of the branches, bring her into the center of her body, and she breathes life into what she wants to see.

She has to laugh. She'd certainly never been taken for a trance woman in her life at home. "I am not such a one. An old housewife, I, a farmwife. What be this meandering through fogs of

visions and dancing out foolish steps on a road I don't know? Am I gone mad altogether?"

But what woman, she thinks, who manages the good part of a farm, bearing and raising several children, keeping a home, and dancing the nights away at each moon, is not the most potent magician? So the vision rests within her, and she, in the warm sunshine, sweet water rushings, falls gently asleep on the grass there.

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It was nothing really, just a tug at the edge of her senses that pulled a little to the right and off again up, a bit like a moth flies. But more like a mosquito in her ears just now when she was trying to concentrate on finding the road again. Bedamn that dark had fallen so fast on her this night.

She stumbles over a root, cursing more and sits suddenly in a patch of damp moss. "At least tis soft." And as she sits, not thrashing any more through the brambles and muddy thickets she's fallen into, the mosquito, the high whiner, fine diner, the erratic moth at her senses, comes into focus and tugs more fiercely. "What, what? What do ye want of me now, damn ye? Here I be, stuck in the godawful mud, and ye have to be at me. Leave off!" No change. If anything the pull grows stronger, and she's almost yanked to her feet.

"So then, what if I listen, what then? Been at me for days. Can't think, can't sleep, get lost, don't eat. Is it my death ye be wanting? I don't even know at all what ye are or if ye are. Or am I going batty altogether in my wanderings?" Finally she gives in. Head turned to one side, arms reaching up, still grumbling, she rises and turns to her right. Closing her eyes, she listens with her body, the way you listen to the cows at night to see are they all right, the way you listen to the sea if you've ever met the sea. And so she turns, quite slowly now, hands before her in the dark, feeling the vines, the tree branches and trunks, the blackberry thickets, but listening wholebodily and following the pull.

Time does not pass in this place. Cold is not cold. Dark not dark. Dora knows the sureness in her body and that is all, stepping quietly around and over the obstacles that she had been stumbling through a few moments before. The ground grows less muddy under her feet, fewer brambles to stumble over, trees thin, and the pull on her loosens its hold.

She opens her eyes and sees dimly in the filtered starlight a new path in front of her, one she hasn't been on before, at least as far as she can remember and she's not at all sure these days how much that is. The track still leads west but looks wider and more travelled. She can even see, a few miles further on maybe, thin trails of sparks rising above the trees. That makes her nervous enough. Last few days the folk haven't been the friendliest sorts. Mostly look down-trodden, though, more than outright hostile, just afraid themselves and not wishing to do harm.

"Well I'll be. I don't rightly know what to think any more. Time I was abed anyway. Won't do for me to be hanging about out here." A little further on she sees a dark blotch of tall trees in a clump by the road and makes for it over a small grassy mound. Once inside she can see nothing, but the feel of the place is warm and safe. The thickness of the trees blocks out all light, but she finds a fairly level, smooth spot and lays out her blankets on the ground. And freed of that mosquito guide she lies down, covers herself up and falls pretty fast asleep.

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She tosses and turns, twisting the blanket into knots about her, the dark protective grove she lies in still and calm. Ay, ah. There are fingers pointing, shaking at her, and she runs. "Old woman, old woman, seeker, ha!" from all directions the derision comes. "I am old, I am, and I be seeker too, you little bastards! You shan't frighten me." In the dream she turns and flaps her skirts at them like chickens. They waver and scatter, turning into rags and fallen leaves around her. What a to do and what about? Is there anyone there at

all or is it just myself fighting myself as usual? Who would want to frighten her off of doing such a thing? No, it must be herself.

When she woke this time, it was still dark and darker yet in the grove where she had chosen to sleep. She pushed off the leaves that had fallen on to her face and suddenly grew very still listening. The voices from her dream sounded again, calling and deriding, pinning her down to the earth like an animal. But how hear them now? Still asleep? No.

They were getting closer, and as she cowered down, a body came rolling into the circle of trees, bumping to a stop right at her side. And the voices went on by, with torches she could see now and running feet and curses. She and the body lay very very still side by side, breathing so little they could have been stones. For some reason, and she thought of her dream, no one came to look in the trees.

Ay, ay. She could still think at least even if she could not move just yet. She wasn't at all sure the body knew she was there. A strange pass to be sure. The pipe and a bit of tea would mend it. But she could still hear the crashing of feet moving farther and farther off and she lay still a long time more.

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How and afar and away, and I a seeker be. An old woman. Times I forget, my heart not in it no more, trudging along dusty ways. Miss the home and the old one and the child, gone though they be. Haven't seen nor heard much of folk since I left. Have to be wary and anyway there's not many about it seems. Just enough to ask for a bite to eat and some to take with me. Old folk I see look beaten down.

I mostly pretend as I'm like em, look to the ground, trudge along, don't let nothing show. People do be suspicious if you be too different. Tuck me hair under a scarf to keep it down. I've always been a dancer but now it's best to look baggy. The dancing we've done, the whole village, for days. What a wildness, whirling till we turned into flames ourselves. Or the quiet dances where we vanished into our own breath. Among your own it's different. Out

here, you better be an old leaf and no more, show up no more than that.

Tis hard to be alone too. You've lived with folk all your days and the chatter all around, someone to sip a cup with, do the clothes with, have a natter, and now nothing but the birds. Mind you, the birds is very fine too, but they b'ain't much for conversation like. Every now and then I'll do a bit of a dance on the road just to keep my spirits up, and it do seem to help me keep direction too. And I have my aim straight as an arrow before me, and downhearted though I be, it pulls me on like the bucket from a well into the strong arms above.

Gettin romantic too now I am. Think so much of those that's not here, makes me misty eyed, and I such a hard old one. I think it the lack of solid work myself. All my days I've worked all and every day at good hard, solid, mouth filling, back covering, you see what you done, sort of work. And now this new work I do be not like that at all. Tis afar off and away, no more solid than starlight. Strong as it may be and pulling on me with all its might, tis like a will o the wisp all the same. And what have I to do with will o the wisps? They're no more than spiders' webs to me to be brushed out of corners of a room. And here this spider web has gone and brushed me out of my own corner and all!

Chapter II

The bundle of body beside her stirred among the leaves with a soft rustle. She let it slowly sit up and rub its head and she lay there until she heard small sobs that let on the body was crying. Then in a little tiny most unfrightening voice she could manage she whispered "Be you all right me dear?" The body jumped anyway and made as if to scramble off again into the trees.

Dora grabbed what seemed to be an arm and spoke again. "Now I may not be any more safe than you me dear, so why would I speak if I wished ye harm?" Her loneliness sprung up and she found herself crying too like a big old baby, and the two of them quite unabashed, blubbered for a good half hour. Even as she cried, Dora was thinking of the great soggy pool they must be making in the trees and couldn't help a gurgly laugh. They lay a good while more in silence, one arm of the other still clutched in Dora's hand, and gradually dim light began to dilute the blackness of the trees. Little by little as they peered first outward to where the voices and footsteps had vanished who knows how long before and only then toward each other, Dora could make out a fairly little roundish sort of body, certainly no bigger than herself.

"Well", said the body, still snuffling a bit, "what are you doing here?"

"And I may ask the same," remarked Dora a bit huffed. "Who was you arunning from then? Fair gave me the fright of my life."

"They'd be after you too if they knew," said the other, nodding her head sadly. "I was running from a crowd of ugly stupid knownothing thickheaded idiots, that's who. I'm a free woman of the roads, and they're scared of me, that's why. Anything they don't see every day in the cabbage patch they try and kill. That's how it is."

The little shape before Dora seemed to grow visibly and to shake with rage and bitterness. "I live the way I have always lived,

and my mother before me. I harm no one and I have helped many. But in these parts fear is more ready to hand than food. I have encountered fools before but never such malicious hatred as these folk live with daily. They truly wished to kill me.”

She sniffed and then grew silent, seemed to shrink down again onto the leafy ground of the grove. Dora patted the arm she held and made sounds of commiseration.

“What be your name?” she asked, reaching out in her feelings to this other, the only woman she had met who was searching the roads like her.

“What’s it to you?” snapped the other, who seemed quite ready to take out her fright and anger on this new stranger in her path. But then Dora could sense her pulling herself up short, as though she realized Dora might be a different sort than the cowed and unreliable folk she had been running into. “Well, I’ll tell you, no harm done. It’s Sy.”

“Sy? Never heard of a name like that,” said Dora.

“So are you going to chase me down too then? It’s for less than having an odd name I ended up here with you now.”

“No, course not,” answered Dora, “It’s just one I never heard of, that’s all. Mine’s Dora. Ordinary enough.”

“Not where I come from,” Sy sniffed and poked at the ground with her toe.

The light was slowly bringing back the colors all around them. Dora found herself faced with a small, skinny old woman who looked round because of the amount of clothes she wore, layers of them, all somehow spotlessly clean (Dora was sure she wasn’t too savory herself) and combined in the most outrageous colors which grew louder as the sun reached into the trees.

The toe Sy was poking into the ground was covered in what looked like an old satin slipper, a sort of duckweed green, which didn’t appear as though it’d provide much protection for a woman of the roads. And Sy may have been a slightish sort of woman but if the size of the pack she was leaning against was anything to go by, she didn’t lack for muscle.

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Doe (funny she should suddenly think of herself as Doe now, just as if she was at home) thought about lighting up her pipe. She needed the comfort. But remembering the feet gone thundering by she let it lie. She reached under her bedding and pulled out a flask of cold tea, slowly uncorked it looking all the while at Sy who had closed her eyes and could have been asleep, and took a long drink.

Thinking “Thank you for tea”, she patted the ground and reached the flask to Sy who went on looking asleep. Dora bumped the flask against the little woman’s arm, “Have a drop of tea, dear. It’ll make ee feel better”. Sy jumped. She must have been far away or maybe she could really go to sleep just like that.

Sy looked dazed but took the flask. She turned about and rummaged round the back of her pack, eventually brought out a little tin mug and poured herself a drink. Dora felt a bit insulted, wondered if she really looked that dirty and wiping her hands on the front of her skirt, took the flask back and had another drink. As Sy closed her eyes again, Dora took the chance to get a really good look at her.

Sy had over her shoulders a shawl such as Dora had never seen in her life. It was made of some material that shimmered and changed its shades of moss green every time the small woman as much as breathed. It had a long fringe of the same thread which fluttered even though there was no breeze. Fantastic beasts and birds wandered over it among huge leaves and flowers. Dora couldn’t take her eyes away and looked up suddenly to find Sy staring at her.

“Like my shawl, do you,” Sy grinned.

“Where did you ever get that?”

“Found it,” muttered Sy and seeming to get wary, turned away, and though Dora thought it might be tricks of the dawning light, the shawl seemed to go dull and limp at the same time.

From under the shawl an alarming array of different and often discordant colors appeared and disappeared. A russet arm moved over a purple waist and reached to pull an orange scarf aside. The first layer of skirt Dora could see was bright blue and the apron over

it was yellow. Under the first she caught glimpses of other skirts, brown, white, orange and purple.

It seemed anyway that Sy hadn't been trying very hard to hide. What a strange one she was, and so wary too. She was looking now at Dora looking at her with a kind of defiance but also, if Dora wasn't much mistaken, a kind of hopefulness. The hope, defiance and wariness flickered across her face like clouds. It didn't seem she was very good at hiding her own self either. Maybe she'd decided that since that was the sort she was, she might as well go the whole hog and shine like a beacon.

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"Well I never," Dora muttered as she hauled herself to her feet. Couldn't remember when she'd ever met with such an oddbody, man, woman or child. What did she do, this woman of the roads? How did she eat? Had she always been so, always dressed like this? Where was she going, how far come? None of the questions left Dora's mouth. Her last question hadn't met with too much kindness. But, "Where be you headed for?" she asked nonetheless, not to be entirely put off.

"I wasn't headed for anywhere," said Sy, quite straight-forwardly this time, "but I was headed away from those mugheads that's for sure. Just because I don't shuffle along like they think is right. Old women have to be widows or wives, grandmothers and kept behind walls in these parts or they're hunted down and done away with. They don't like old women. Don't rightly know why. And certainly they didn't take any great fancy to me."

"Did they catch ye on the road?" said Dora. "No, no. I'd set up in the village to read hands, and they were on me like a pack of dogs. I was stupid mind you. Didn't look about me as I should've. And I who know very well where I am and who I am."

"Well, where do we be?" As Dora was travelling the roads herself, she hardly thought of the places she was passing through, only of what was behind and what was ahead. Her dowdy clothes and

shuffling gait had been like the strange dances she sometimes found herself doing, an instinct that she always listened to.

Sy got up off the ground now too and she pointed the way the running feet had come, the same way Dora had been going, and spat. “The land of bastards, that’s where. You should keep in the knowledge of where your feet are going. They don’t like strangers here in the lowlands before the mountains.” Sy turned around slowly and looked at Dora. “Well where were you going yourself? You don’t look like a travelling woman to me.”

Dora thought to herself that she looked more like a travelling woman than Sy did. How did she walk the miles in them silly shoes anyway? And for sure she’d managed to stay out of trouble better than Sy had. “Travelling woman or no, I be seeking. Been out here now two or three months so far as I can tell. And I don’t rightly know where I be going if you’re asking for names. But I know the direction that feels right. The country herself, t’ain’t familiar to me, but there’s always an air to her and a feel underfoot that calls me.”

Dora wondered if she’d be able to keep hold of her knowledge with another body along with her. She tried the air with her arms and could still feel the steady stream of knowledge toward the edge.

Chapter III

There were, she remembered suddenly and with seemingly no reason, three places, three times in her life when she'd been really scared. And they'd all to do with light. Not the kind of softly growing light that brightened around them now nor the calm pale moonlight of the night before. Not even the light of the torches smoking past her as she lay trembling in the grove. 'Twas the light of death she thought, and tweren't even the death she feared but the light itself, a colorless and mesmerizing noise in the eye. It was always illness brought the light to her before, as a child, young woman and dame. But why did it come to her now?

Half blind with memory she reached out and touched the trunk of the tallest tree, leaned her head against it and stopped fighting back the thoughts. Fear came with them in waves and made her feel sick. She tried to shake herself out of it, foolishness with nothing to blame, but felt herself instead sliding slowly down the solid dark trunk of the tree till she lay coiled around it at the bottom. Her body touching the bark, she felt safe to move toward the danger in her mind. Vaguely and with half a wry chuckle she wondered what Sy must be thinking or if she'd noticed at all, odd creature.

This was no illness though. And she was not disoriented as she had always been before. Now she let the light take away her mind, not so much confident that she might have it back but willing to let her search take any form it would. So, for a while, there was nothing, no memory and no thought, no wondering, no sight and no hearing, no Dora. The closest she could come to describing it later was how it was to push a child into the world, close to bursting or levitating into a cloud of buzzing air. No room for thought in the great effort and the complete bodily being of it.

She was sure as she returned to herself curled about the tree that her head must now have a large hole in it. And she even put up her hands to feel. But no, just the old scarf as she'd left it. So

she lay and rested awhile. Funny she'd never thought to question those strange and terrifying flashes till now. She'd been ill and that was that. And anyway there'd been no place for such questions in her life. You were ill or you were well, fed or hungry, awake or asleep, even alive or dead. But who on beloved earth would ever ask if you'd been grabbed away by a wicked light or no? Foolishness!

When she tried to sit up she found herself weak as water and had to roll around a bit to get upright. And she kept her eyes closed fairly tight all the while, a little afraid of what she'd see if she opened them and what time might have passed. She rested a while more like that, back leaning against the tree till she felt the warmth of the sun on her face and could sense the flicker of shadow on her eyelids, and only then opened her eyes a bit just to make sure she still was where she'd started out.

And so she was. Her pack lay over there, a little messier and bigger than she remembered, but that might be her imagination playing tricks. Some sunlight filtering down from fairly high in the sky by now splashed across her face, fluttering a bit as the leaves shuddered above. She turned her head very slowly.

Sy was lying back against her pack, mouth open and practically snoring. Most like she hadn't noticed a thing. Dora closed her eyes again and drifted in the blessed dark. Fancy that! The dark. Imagine if 'twere all soul blasting light like that and never a corner to hide in. I never! 'Twould send a body raving for sure. The dark like the shawls old women wear, good for hiding, good for keeping warm. That light, what were that for? Scared her to think of it again. She was sure twas not a state meant for humans at all. It felt like the inside of a mad dog's eye, glaring and obsessed. There weren't no direction, no shadow.

Was she supposed to learn something from that terror? When she felt better she'd let it all filter down and examine it. At least, she thought, this time it hadn't whipped her about like a dog seized rat. This time she'd gone towards it and not run. And every time it changed her somehow, the very cells she was sure, her shape. She poked herself again as though she could feel the change that way. Run towards it, and why, what dummy runs toward that kind of

danger? Her own kind of dummy for sure. Next she'd be throwing on armor and out you go Dora for hand to hand combat on the field! What nonsense.

She tried to get up and was so stiff she had to crawl up the tree trunk, then stood there swaying some and grumbling quite a lot about her knees and her back and several other bits of her. 'Twas the lack of tea she was sure, and a bit of a smoke wouldn't harm either. "I am old and so it is. It can't be changed. I should never have left me cosy bed. I'm an old dote, losing me mind." She made her way slowly over to Sy holding onto branches all the way and feeling quite sorry for herself.

She planned to wake Sy up as gently as possible and find out what the other woman thought they should do. She didn't much fancy another night in the grove herself, and feeling the pulling of the journey in her legs strong as ever, knew that her newly found travelling companion wouldn't have much to say about anything if that mosquito nag of Dora's decided to pull her off on another wild gallivant in the dark, stiff and aching old body or no.

Before she got to where Sy was lying, Sy groaned and snorted in her sleep and, seeming to struggle with a horde of enemies, rolled off her pack and landed up on her face in the leafmould. Dora stepped back a bit for you could never be sure quite what mood Sy would be in next. But Sy came up laughing, spitting bits of leaf and twig and brushing the black mould off her clothes.

"Well what are you staring at woman dear woman? I must have been hungry in my sleep, needed a solid bit of earth to chew on. Speaking of which, what do we have to eat between us, and that without lighting a fire?"

Dora was flummoxed for a second at Sy's speed of recovery. Then she turned to her own pack and bent down to look for the cloth twisted about her bread and a bit of cheese. The pack seemed strange to her and she wondered whether it was just her journey out of time that made it seem so. But no, it was different and she started to worry when she saw that someone or something had been rummaging around untidily in her things and had put them back

wrong. Her hand went suddenly to her side where she kept the little pouch with her money. Blessed be, it was still there.

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Dora decided to keep her mouth shut for a while and give herself time to think. She fished out the food bundle, unwrapped the bit of black bread and hard cheese from the checkered cloth and pulled the flask of tea from under her bedding, keeping her face hidden the while in case she gave away her worry. It couldn't have been anyone but Sy unless some uncommon clever animal was hiding in the woods thereabout. But Sy didn't seem one silly enough to go grubbing into another's belongings and then not put them back aright. Go grubbing into another's things, aye, but put them back all awry, no.

Was Sy trying to spin her around now? Dora tried to look at the other woman without being seen and managed only to catch Sy looking at her. She needed time to think, looked away again, walking slowly toward the other woman with the food in her hands. So, was Sy just pretending to be asleep then? Had she seen the whole thing, Dora falling down the tree, and not tried to help, gone and scrounged through Dora's pack while poor old Doe was lying aloony in the grass? A great lash of anger crashed through her and she had to fix her eyes on a tussock of grass at her feet to keep from roaring her outrage at Sy. No joke and no joke indeedy. This was no companion for her travelling if that was so. And find out she must. But how?

Sy was now searching out the remains of her last meal in her own pack and had laid out a couple of eggs and a slab of hock on the grass. She looked up, face full of that same wariness and hope as before, but now Dora couldn't help but wonder exactly what the hope was about and what the wariness.

She told herself she'd first eat a bit to get her strength up and then take on Sy eye to eye. So they sat amid the tall trees eating a fair amount of good food, not speaking, drinking the cold tea. Dora couldn't look up. She ate her fill staring at her shoes. She could feel

in the unspoken breath of them a growing panic and knowing now it was none of her own, she felt it to be Sy. Still not look up. Eat in the silence. And then, finally, without Dora having asked anything at all, Sy burst out.

She had gotten up and was bobbing about in the strangest way. Her face was twisted up and she flapped her arms about from side to side. She part sang, part moaned and part shouted at Dora or at least Dora felt it must be at her since no other soul was about.

Home is no more home. Sick means nothing. I am turned about and never the same. The ones I knew are gone from me, I am gone from them, never the same. The past is strange and the future unclear. In the present is nothing but a fog. I, like a lighthouse learning to walk. No one is with me. Moving this way I am taken. I am taken afar and not brought home. Egged on by a mad light I dance to a sad song. Go away from me. I carry a plague. You, large, healthy, rosy faced, you make me crazy, more than I am. I am spinning away on a trout beam, spun by a fisher mad with desire and I'll know home no more. I am Sy, a sigh, and you do not know me, can never. Brought to you here, I need you. You are earth. I am wind. I need to know you and I cannot ask. I am outcast. No one will. So I searched for you in yours. I must know you. Deny me not."

Sy fluttered like a bird, half hopped away, and fell down again into the leafmould.

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Dora sat with her mouth open, wordless, looking at Sy who now did not look at her. Suddenly she thought that she seemed to be acquiring a rather elderly child. Could anyone imagine a more roundabout and twisty way of telling a body ye liked them and wanted to be about them? And do I want a child now or don't I? A shifty, unpredictable, scared, defiant, vagabond of a child who just happened to be an old woman too. No, no, definitely no.

And how to go about leaving her behind? There was certainly more to this gallivanting about on the roads than met the eye. Dora

decided that for some reason it was now upon her to provide for this elderly juvenile, if not by inviting her along, at least by leaving her with some earth of her own to hang onto since it seemed that was what she needed.

Again she needed time to think, but Sy didn't give her a chance. She sat up suddenly and looked as straight at Dora as anyone had ever looked. "There's no going back for us now", she said. "You've seen me and I've seen you. Who else is there you know on the whole of this great mother planet that is like us? You seeking and I seeking, you with your godawful holy fits and I with mine. Both of us in danger from the ignorant and the savage. Different from you I certainly am but more like than most you'll meet."

Dora was flummoxed for a second time in only the wink of an eye. Could this baggage tell what she was thinking and forestall her just like that? Or was she in and out of strange experiences just as Dora was? Seeking just as Dora was? It was all too much and moving much too fast. She decided, come what may, she would light a fire just a wee one boil up some water and have fresh tea and a pipe. Before that not a word would she say.

She turned her back on Sy who at least seemed to understand that she needed a little while to think and who said not a word more. As she searched about for twigs and small branches, dried leaves and pine needles to start the fire, she let herself grow as still as she could, without thought, and moved herself almost wholly into her body's simple task.

First build a small circle of medium sized stones, the kind unlikely to split in heat. Place leaves so with space for air, and twigs so, broken and piled all dry as can be. She took from her belt the flint and steel she carried always, at home or here, and to strike the sparks. After a goodly while the crumbly leaves began to smoulder and she bent further still to blow gently into the heart of the smoke. A tiny flame flared and died, and another.

Twigs caught. Dora broke more quickly and placed them tenderly and some larger ones then. Let it burn hot with little smoke. Fire was set. So she sat back, reached over to her turned about pack and pulled out the battered little pan, filled it from the skin flask of

water and set it carefully, ever so, on a stone right by the heart of the fire.

While she waited for the water to boil so fast on open fire she turned again to look for her pipe. Oh no, twas in her pocket. She tapped it out, scraped it a little with a small stone, and filled it with rich mixture. She'd pulled and dried the herbs herself. So, take a little stick from the fire and light up. Ah, now.

The short morning had seen more upendings than Dora could rightly remember in any other short morning of her life. Sitting determinedly with her back to Sy, pulling slowly on the pipe and watching the flames of the small fire, she let herself begin to think. There was, to be sure, no way of knowing the future. Whether the little woman would be more of a help or more of a burden she could not say. First, this body comes rolling in all unannounced and makes herself at home without a by your leave. She were brazen. But canny too. And canny be always needed. A body knowledgable of roads and of they that live on them.

But the weasel in the woman. What to think of that? The sneaky one that would not ask but waited the chance. I don't know, I'm sure. Dora felt a touch of despair. She needed the company. How could she trust this soul? She'd have to talk. But the water was boiling in the pot, and Dora stopped her thinking to take it off, add the leaves, and place the tea aside on a cool stone to steep. The sweet aroma of tea. She breathed it, smell of home, remembering, that's better me old dear, old dear, old man, look what your old one is doing, sitting here on the ground, in the midst of a carnival, clowns everywhere and I one.

Now. Dora turned slowly toward Sy, pipe in her hand and the clear odor of the tea around her. And there was that woman up and shouldering her pack, making ready to leave as though all had been decided already.

Sy looked at her and grinned. "I will go. Perhaps it is not time. We are a great pair surely but not yet. You won't lose me I tell you, but I will go now. You are right to do things your way and I mine. Think of me." She bent over under the pack and almost seeming to disappear, pulled a piece of grass from the base of the tree Dora had

held onto and put it into a big pocket in her top skirt. "This for the future," she claimed and turned to go.

Dora whispered, "Take care of thee, m'dear," and waved feebly as Sy made her way slowly out between the trees, stopped on the edge of the grove to look about up and down the track and then made her way back towards the east.

. . .

Dora felt dazed and no wonder. She turned once more toward her pot of tea which was well steeped by now. She took the old cup slowly out of the pack, wiped it out on the edge of her skirt and poured a little tea into it. Her mind was blank. She sipped small sips of tea and puffed slowly on the pipe, sitting in the sun and letting all float down through her like the snow in a glass ball. By and by she'd have to up and pack and on her way, but just now this was the needed thing. As the sun moved slowly down the sky, her head dropped and she fell asleep, the pipe gone out in her hand and the cup rolled away into a hollow by the fire.

The fire itself crumbled and flared and smouldered down. She roused herself and looked about. It was twilight already, at least among the great trees, and no time to be getting up and about. She piled more dry leaves on the hot ashes of her little fire and broke more twigs, got it going again.

She deserved a treat and that's for sure. So out of the pack comes a small rasher of bacon and an egg, so carefully wrapped and put away the week before. She spears the rasher with a stick and puts it to the flame, not too close but a slow burn. The water pot is on the fire again and when it boils, in goes the egg to poach. All gets put on a small wooden platter and the pot on the fire again for more hot tea.

Now this was the life, so simple. No crazy old ladies to stir things up and force her to act too fast. She laughed suddenly, a great giggle she couldn't stop for a while, when she thought of the names her kinfolk would throw at her for calling another old woman a crazy old lady. Hah!

When she'd eaten and drunk another cup, Dora stood by the fire and looked about her. Her bedding was still in place. She'd tidy the pack and make ready to leave in the morning. She wasn't too sure of a direction at this time for she was not at all keen to pass through the village that had given Sy so much trouble. So she stood awhile and slowly her hands came up before her face, and one of her dances came to her, this one slow and winding about the fire, small steps weaving and her hands shaping the air. As she went she made small moaning sounds that grew until she was crying out without thinking of her loss at being alone again.

And she moved on and the movements changed until she was whirling surefooted among the tree roots and came to stop at the great tree she had used for safety before. She knew then she must go toward the village whatever might come of it. That was the direction. The mountains could be seen from the village. Somehow she knew that. Perhaps she might pass through without commotion, well hidden in her bent old woman self. And the "bent" bit was more and more true these days. Too much more sleeping on damp ground and she wouldn't move at all.

She put her hands to the tree trunk and lowered her head to the mossy bark. Tree thoughts and her thoughts. She put her hands to the ground and bent her head to the leafmould. Ground thoughts and hers. Stayed so for a time. The fire died again. She got up, crossed to the bedding and lay down. This time, woven well into the grove and rooted in herself, she fell asleep and dreamed no dreams.

. . .

Dora woke slowly this morning, savored the aloneness she had grieved over the night before, spoke to no one, lay a long while looking up through all the branches as the sunlight grew brighter. I be a happy woman, indeed I do be. She rose slowly, washed her face with a little water, changed her clothes and hung the old ones on bushes to air, brushed out her hair. Slowly she went looking for leaves and twigs and built up the small fire again. As the water

boiled she carefully repacked her bundle. It didn't take long. She hadn't much. The bedding she rolled tightly as always and put it under the rest.

She quietly sipped her morning tea and chewed thoughtfully on her last piece of tea dunked bread. When finally she rose and covered the fire with damp soil, scattered the rocks and roughed up the smoothed out spot she'd been sleeping in, she was well ready for a good day's walk. Bless the grove, as she bent to give the ground a last pat. She strapped on her pack, the airing clothes folded around the outside, and walked through the trees to the edge of the track. She peered along the path in both directions just as Sy had done, stepped out and made for the opposite way.

Chapter IV

It was only just after sunrise, a time she loved, everything still and slowly opening to the sun. Dora felt so new that the day brought wonder to her like a child. The morning air was sweet with scents cow parsley, honeysuckle, damp grass, meadowsweet. Bumblebees tumbled among the flowers, and dragonflies wafted along flashing their satin bodies. And strange to say, she still felt as though Sy were there, connected to her by some long strand of web that pulled just a little from behind her. She was beginning to be more aware of these pulls, not a few of them now. From the way she had come was Sy and her old dear and her village. From before her the strong pull of the edge and her seeking. And there were others she wasn't sure of.

As she thought about these things she kept her eyes and ears about her just in case. The track was well used and might be travelled on by unfriendly folk. She hadn't worried much on the other path. It had been little used and she hadn't by then come across Sy and her story. She would have to find herself something to eat as well. She had eaten the last crumb. This far finding food had been easy. She had only a little money but a lot of knowhow and so had helped about the places she stopped at in exchange for a meal. The folk around these parts had little money of their own. It wouldn't have been wise to let on she had some. And anyway, farm folk can always use a helping hand.

She decided she would skirt around the village as much as she could, despite her feeling that she must go toward it. No point in inviting trouble. She'd stick to the farms. Farm folk generally mind their own business, so they do. She minded well enough now an old one who came to them when they were first married. Be sure she were older than I be now. She stayed on around a month. Worked hard, said little. No one asked more of her than that she do her share. And she left as she came, without a word.

And was she now such an old one? And were there more besides herself and Sy? What brought the old to such madcap travels? It tickled her to think of the old folk, all stick in the muds if you'd believe the young, with passion and desire pursuing an aim no more and no less material than a sunbeam. It made her chortle as she walked. The picture of Sy in all her circus color tumbling about the countryside and of herself crouched in groves of trees like an old bear.

The track which had been fairly straight and wide to this point took a sudden turn and grew narrower. Dora stopped and listened, suddenly wary. She felt the village just ahead of her and could hear faint morning sounds of water splashing, children shouting. A donkey brayed somewhere off to the right. Taking time to move quietly she made her way into the trees off the path and to the left. Once she was sure she was fairly well hidden, she sat down with her pack still on her back and listened again, this time for her own guide.

And she had a long wait of it. She was getting hungry, and the sounds of the village had become quite familiar when she felt tugged further off to the left. She started to get up but fell down again because her left leg had gone to sleep. She would have laughed if she hadn't been so pothered. Did anything ever go in straight lines? When she wanted the pesky mosquito that pulled her, she could wait until she died of hunger. When she didn't want it there was nothing else. She had to rub her leg and jump up and down to get rid of the pins and needles and that was quite a deed in itself with the pack on her back and all. And a sight to behold she supposed she was.

When her leg was back to itself she turned herself inward again, unseeing, and began to walk. The pull was steady and strong. But it didn't last long. She had gone only a hundred yards or so when it faded, and she opened her eyes to see where she might be this time.

She knew with a certain horror before she even opened her eyes. There was a bustle in the air, village noises right beside her, the dusty smell of paths walked all day in the sun. Just on the edge

of the village itself, she stood in the shade of the trees that overhung the well. It's a hard thing indeed when your own guide that's supposed to lead you right takes you into the midst of danger. Well, she guessed no one had ever said the right path was a safe one.

She stood there looking at the place Sy had fled from only a little more than a day before. It seemed ordinary enough. A young woman with two buckets and a child hanging on each was walking towards her. Somebody further away was loading firewood onto a donkey. Children were scurrying about, fighting in the dust, playing hopscotch, chasing each other.

But well and good to stay wary. 'Twas not her own village, not her own kind, and Sy's words stayed in her head, "anything they don't see every day in the cabbage patch . . .". She couldn't from where she was see any old folk so she didn't know exactly what the cabbage patch looked like. And it was for this reason that she decided to pull back into the trees and take a more careful look before she ventured out into the open.

And soon she was glad enough that she had. Out from one of the small houses came a man in his middle years and with him he dragged an old man, dressed as she was in drab, shapeless, dirty homespun. He was pulling on the old man and shaking him and cursing.

"Ye know better than to open thy mouth fool", he was saying. "The old must be silent and unseen, not reminding us of our fates to become dithering, dribbling gas bladders. Ye have broken with your family by your complaining and no more shall ye live with us." He dragged the old man, who was whimpering and half resisting, to the edge of the village opposite from where Dora stood, and threw him on the ground. "Find your own way. I am finished with ye." He turned and walked away without looking back.

Dora waited and watched for a long time. She was very afraid, both to remain where she was and to move. But she crept further into the shadows of the blessed trees and watched. She had to know what happened. The old man did not move. After what seemed half a day and just at a time when all activity in the village had seemed to cease, a small grey shadow came creeping out of the

underbrush near the old fellow. Dora screwed up her eyes to get a better look. As far as she could see it was another small old person. Whoever it was moved painfully carefully and looked about her or him all the time. And then she saw another small grey shadow move slowly out from under the trees. The two bent over the old man and gently touched him.

As they touched him the old man raised his head, and it looked as though they must be talking to him because he nodded and finally rose slowly first to his knees and then, with help, to his feet. The two on either side of him led him away into the trees. Dora let no time slip away. She went as fast as she could, without leaving the circle of trees, around to her right, across the track again, and over to the opposite side. The three figures had disappeared by then but she could see scufflings in the leaves where the first old man had dragged his feet as he was led away.

She followed the trail. It was not hard and she wondered why it was that the villagers didn't try to find out where the old man had gone. It would have been easy enough. The thought made her nervous, and she quickened her walking. She noticed then that the land around her began gradually to change. The trees thinned and were smaller. The ground which had been flat for days behind her began to have a chop to it. And she was walking uphill more often than down.

She stopped and looked up in front of her. Oh, her breath was taken away. Mountains upon mountains, up into the sky, gentle at first down here, but more and more ragged and dangerous, till far away they were black and swirling with cloud.

She had to sit down. She'd heard stories of mountains all right but never seen them. So she sat for a while gaping, that's all she could rightly call it, mouth open like a fish. And she'd have to climb them, maybe even cross over. How in the blazes was a body sposed to do that? "But I must, so it do seem. Though by now I never can be sure just how a thing will come to pass. Seems best to think of it as done and not my doing."

She had forgotten all the village, old man, the trail as she sat and looked at the great wall in front of her. She did not hear the

soft rustle of footsteps coming closer and finally standing right by her. The voice made her jump right out of her skin.

“Could not be done without ye,” said the voice.

She turned so sharply that she nearly fell over, looked up at the figure standing beside her. The figure squatted down, and she stared into the face of a man about her age, dressed in the same drab, but what a different look from the beaten ones she’d been seeing on the road. The man’s eyes sparkled and laughed and he gazed right at her as though fear had never touched him. He was worn with work and the weather right enough but not cowed.

“Ye’ve been following us,” he said. “We did not know until ye stopped. Ye are welcome to come with us.” She watched him still without speaking. She knew better since Sy than to be rushed. He turned and waved toward a line of birch fifty feet or so away. A second or two after, the old man from the village, walking still stiffly and bent, and the other one she had seen came out of the small trees towards them.

“Aren’t ee afraid to be found?” asked Dora who suddenly became aware of how exposed they were.

“No one cares”, replied the man beside her. “Once we are gone, we are gone. They want as little to do with us as possible. That is why we are forbidden to leave our houses in the village. Death is the fault of the old if you’d believe them. But be sure we do not go out of our way to let them know we are well and alive.

“My name is Ham,” he added, “I am sixty four.” How strange to hear that said with such pride. Where Dora came from age was given small notice. You grow older. That is all. And maybe you grow wiser and maybe you grow weaker, but maybe not. Every person a new story.

She said, “I am Dora. Do ee wish my age?” Just then the other two came up. The one was a tall woman, older than Dora. She had a limp and was very dark, both her hair and her skin.

“Your age is your business,” the woman answered. “We like to say it. It is our pride to have survived. I am Nan. I have 65 years. I was the first to be chased from the village--a troublemaker always.” She laughed and turned to the old man with her who was as dark as she, and took his hand. “My father,” she said, “Dov, is 80 years old. I would not speak for him were he not very tired.”

Dora looked up at both of them and bowed slightly as she sat. "I followed ye from the village. I saw ye struck down mister and I was in no mind to be likewise struck. A woman I met on the road just now had been chased for her life from that same place."

Ham interrupted, "Ay we saw that. Could do little about it, though we led them astray after she went off the path."

Dora nodded, "I tried to avoid the village but could not. I need your help. I am going on into the mountains. Do ye live far?"

The others stared as at a mad thing. "Ye'll venture into the mountains?" asked Nan. "A fool ye, then. None we know have done more than climb the first peak. There be no end to they. And there be lions and wild things. If they don't eat thee the cold be enough."

Dora laughed. "Get on with ye," she said. "D'ye think I talk lightly? D'ye think I'd go had I the choice? I must so I must and I shall go, like it or not. But I need rest and I need knowledge and I be hungry as a lion myself. Do ye live far?"

"Not far," said Ham. "Come."

* * *

For more information,

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