A Map of the Mountains

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I did not think the sky had any weight until I first saw the old man; his back was bent from some tremendous burden, bent like no other man's I had ever seen, and I concluded that the sky must grow heavier as you come closer to it, and that he, almost alone in having crossed the mountains, was permanently encumbered by it. I was sitting where you are sitting now, I think, although I confess there are some inconsistencies I can't account for. I remember looking up at the peaks behind him as we talked, but of course, if I was inside I would simply have seen the wall. That is, nonetheless, how I remember: this table, these chairs, this house with no walls.

He knew, of course, why I had come the moment he saw me. He was saddened by my arrival. His eyes were rueful and his gait was slow. I imagined him in my approach with a different face, carved from the granite of the mountains, impervious from weathering so many seasons. He resembled the mountains' ephemera far more than their stone: the dust that clings to a bare slope, a husk of grass emaciated from thirst. He was standing in the yard, and he just motioned me in to the house when he saw me come over the hill and went in ahead of me to put on a kettle. He did not bother saying anything until he had served tea. I think it was the same tea we are drinking now.

“Tea?”

Yes . . . oh.

“We are not drinking tea.”

I see that now. You will forgive me; I get absorbed in the story I am telling. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between then and now.

He did not even ask my name; he only asked why I wanted to cross the mountains. I imagined the question was the beginning of a test or contest of wills, although now I am not certain. I told him simply that I wanted to see what was on the other side of them: it was not in my nature to be confined by a boundary I had not tested, simply because the boundary was believed to exist. He said, of course, that it was forbidden. I asked him why. He shrugged with a great nonchalance—a nonchalance that told me he placed no significance in the truth or falsehood of his reply—and told me the dead dwelt in the mountains with the gods. I told him my mother prayed to the same gods for a good harvest in the years the crop flourished that she prayed to in the years it failed. I had never seen the dead in the lowlands and did not expect to see them in the mountains. He lost his nonchalance.

“Let us suppose,” he said, “that a man is coming home late one night and finds himself caught in a storm. He happens upon a cave and decides to take shelter in it. When he enters, he is attacked; he barely escapes with his life, and the claws that tear his skin he mistakes, in that blind moment of desperation, for a cougar's claws, when in fact they belong to a bear. Would you, if you were to happen upon the same cave on some other night, want to venture into it because he mistakenly believed a cougar dwelt there?”

We said no more that night. There was a pile of nets over there, where now weeds have grown up through

them and they have rotted so as to be indistinguishable from the ground. I slept on the nets beneath an overturned boat; I dreamed I was drifting in the boat through the inverted sea of the sky. The rhythm of the ocean had a painful familiarity—I felt as though I was remembering for the first time that it was a precious thing I had lost—and I imagined that my ancestors had been seafarers. I imagined that they lived in whatever lands were beyond the mountains, and that I would, if I returned to their forgotten homeland, comprehend all the painful enigmas that were written in my blood.

For three days, we debated the crossing. I would ask him about the routes, about what a man would need to bring, about what there was to fear. He usually dismissed my questions. He told me that the reasons one might have to make the journey did not ultimately matter, because the crossing would change a person, so that they would no longer have the same desire for it by the time it was achieved. I was chopping wood for the fire and looking up at the peaks, contemplating the routes, and I asked him, if he did not want to guide me, if he would make me a map so that I could go on my own. He sighed and nodded—seemingly in acknowledgement of the inevitability of his reply—and lifted up a handful of loose dirt, bent over as he was in the garden, brought it over to me, and sifted it through his fingers onto the ground at my feet.

“Here,” he said, “I have drawn you the only map of the mountains that can ever be true. Study it well. We will leave tomorrow.”

Just as he said it, a scrub jay called out, and I heard something in its call—its voice was slightly, uncannily changed—that alarmed me. There was a trepidation in the air. The grainy afternoon light hovered over the dying yellow leaves of buckeye and maple, afraid to touch them: afraid, perhaps, that even its imperceptible touch would cause those fragile paper skeletons to crumble to dust. I am afraid to say it—it sounds terribly foolish—but I stood looking at that dust on the ground for a very long time, scrutinizing it for safe passage.

We carried very little, but we trudged up the mountains slowly. Just as I had thought, we were burdened by something, although I am not sure it was the sky itself —I think it was the weight of the imagined boundary. All the centuries that people had looked up at these slopes and regarded them as an inviolable limit on the scope of any conceivable journey made progressing through that terrain difficult. We tried to shed that weight of collective conviction but it clung to the mountains far more fastidiously than any one person could, because it had inhabited them for far longer.

There were no gods or monsters there, the dead did not walk; if the stories of such things were true, they would be simple truths, truths readily fathomed by a child, truths I do not fear. The truths I fear I fear precisely because they are beyond the scope of our imagining.

On the second day we crossed a wide meadow where narrow channels of water cut through the ground every few steps. In the wet soil, we found the track of a cougar. The man bent, stared at it for some time, and slowly, I believe reluctantly, placed his hand down on the track to erase it, or perhaps to make a combined print of his hand and the cougar's, I do not know. There was an undeniable sadness and ceremony to his action, and I do not know the meaning of it.

On the third day, the footsteps began. I heard the sound of an animal behind us on the game trail we were following and turned to see what it was; the old man's hand darted out to grasp my arm, earnestly and wordlessly. He did not look at me. Until that moment, everything he had ever done—every gesture he made; every word he spoke; the weary, repetitive rhythm of his walking—was permeated with a great sense of resignation, frailty, inevitability. But when his hand clutched me I felt for the first time in him tremendous urgency and strength. He gave no sign, no look even, but I knew that I was not to look behind me at whatever was following us. I knew, also, that we were not to speak of it, or think of it: doing so would draw it closer.

We walked like this for some time, wordlessly, our minds empty, the present moment of the journey the entire scope of our world. I could not count precisely the footsteps, particularly because I made myself disregard their sound coming closer and closer, but at some point, whatever creature was stalking us was joined by others. It was, for some reason, only when I remembered him placing his hand into the cougar track that I truly became afraid, and this fear I forced myself to disregard immediately so that I would not make us vulnerable.

All night we trudged along up the mountains and all night they followed, and through the next day—we did not speak a single word the entire time. At some point as it was growing light, he handed me something that he had picked up off the ground, although I did not see him do it: a stone, I suppose it was. Then as the light

of that long sleepless day faded again into dusk, I lost him. When I noticed he was gone, I also instantly realized that he had not been with me for some time. The followers, however, were still right behind me. They were close enough to touch me.

Actually, I am not certain of that: I know they did come that close, but that may have been during the first night. Could it be that some time at the end of that night is when we parted, and that I just did not notice all the next day? Perhaps when he handed me the stone? Sometimes, I do not think they followed me for the rest of that day, at least not very closely. Sometimes I think he parted from me deliberately and —by what method, I can not imagine—drew them off of my route. Perhaps he knew how to evade them, but could only do it alone. I do not know.

And then, I suppose, I just kept walking. I was very weary. I do not think I slept for a very long time. I do not remember laying down to rest, or even eating, for many days. I have made the journey a few times since then, I suppose—it is hard to say exactly how many times. No one has ever asked me to take them. If someone did, I guess that I would—it seems wrong that knowledge of the crossing should be lost forever; although, on the other hand, I am not sure what knowledge, exactly, I have.

Now I am here with you, living in this house, his house —we tend this fire; drink from these cups; wear thinner, ever so slowly, the boards of this floor with the steps we take on them. And you—who are you? Are you my wife? Is that why we live together here?

“It seems as though this would be true. It seems as though the things in this house of ours have known the touch of both our hands for many years, as one would expect of a husband and wife.”

Yes, it seems that way.

“In your journeys have you reached the other side of the mountains?”

The other side? Yes, of course, yes, I have reached the other side.

“What is there?”

It is impossible to say—or rather, it is meaningless to. I have seen clouds in the rivers and fish swimming through the sky. But if I were to go again, I would not see those things. And if you were to go, you would find a different terrain when the final slopes met the floor of the valley. And if I were to take you, we would find still a third thing together. It is, I suppose, the journey that shapes what comes after the mountains. It does not matter how closely you try to adhere to a single route. It is your footstep on a particular fallen madrone branch, the exact current your legs strain against as you wade through a river, the precise root you grasp to pull yourself out of it.

“So the mountains are not real, then—they are whatever one has in their heart, or whatever journey one takes through them?”

No, no. I am certain of very little, but I do know this: the mountains are real. That western slope of fire-killed fir trees we can see from outside the house, looming black against the green slopes that surround it, is truly there. Those trees lived there, lightning struck, they burned, and all but a few died. These things would be true no matter whether anyone had ever known them to be true. Those trees would stand there, waiting to fall, blackened from the same fire, regardless of who walked through them or what secrets troubled them or hopes they held in their heart. No, they are mountains, and they require no explanation other than that—they are true things. It is what's beyond them that has no reckoning on this side.

“But how can that be? How can the course one takes —and the time one takes it, and the person who takes it—through the mountains determine what lies beyond them? How can they shape the land beyond from a person's footsteps, if they are real, and the same to all?”

I don't know. I could explain it better, perhaps, if it were not for one peculiarity I have never understood: I have journeyed over the mountains—I remember these trips, if not perfectly; with effort I could perhaps count them—but I do not remember even the briefest moment from a single journey back.