

The Old Man

A small aspen grew from the dirt. Patches of volcanic rock protruded from the ground like a rash on the back of an old man. The tree stood alone. Not even sage brush accompanied the lone denizen of the rocky expanse. Its leaves trembled in the breeze. Its ivory bark peeled as time tore it from its master. Here the bark clung tight to the tree in a passionate embrace of its source of life. There it dangled, swaying in the wind. Below lay the apathetic victims. Being separated from hope they lay pale upon the ground awaiting slow decay.

Thin boughs grew at angles from a twisted stump that was stunted and bent from many seasons of packed snow and trampling animals. Leaves and branches swayed and trembled together in the slow breeze flowing like sand falling through an hourglass.

A man approached the tree. His skin was wrinkled, his eyes glossy. His thin, pale hair fluttered in the breeze from below the broad brim of a hat. His hands were scarred and callused with thin fingers and large knuckles. Blood flowed through broad veins which expanded and contracted with each beat. A large, angular nose sat enthroned between gray eyes. Irises floated in a sea of cream and yellow as they glinted like stones through glossy corneas.

He stood upright, Old eyes traced the thin branches and quivering silver leaves. In his strong, sinewy hand he held a cedar staff carved with writing that flowed like old dried vines upon brick walls that having been abandoned long ago now bowed to the will of time and nature.

A thin beard hung from his chin and drifted upon the wind before his round chin which was visible through thin strands of white and gray like the jagged face of a cliff side behind a falling, flowing stream of water.

A dark cloak hung open from broad shoulders and fluttered in the wind revealed the attire of a traveler beneath. A woolen shirt, worn and stained and laced near the neck descended to a belt braided of black leather. Clasped with an iron buckle its excess length dangled near the travelers' thigh which was covered by deerskin trousers. Small holes penetrated the thinned knees; strands of ripped leather fell from the hem upon dusty shoes of tanned bear hide.

Still he stood. He watched. He waited. Patient eyes searched the branches as leaves turned in the wind. Quaking, trembling, flowing; the wind touched all. Man and tree alike stood before its gentle pressing. Always blowing, always pressing.

The man breathed deeply, held breath, and then released slowly in a long, slow sigh.

How much longer must I stand against this wind? The leaves of the tree rustled and crackled before him. How long have you stood there? Surely, longer than I have; and yet your leaves still have green amidst the grey. Your trunk is crooked and worn but still you stand strong against the oppressing wind.

Black feathers fluttered and flayed as a large crow came to rest upon a low branch before the man. Obsidian feathers shone and glittered like beams of light upon a still lake. Long wings lay folded upon his back like a blanket of sleek darkness. Short crescents of welcoming down decorated its stately chest. Talons of coal grasped the angled branch loosely. Even seated upon the tree, the crow seemed to hover suspended upon the wind. A pointed beak dark as night opened and a caw sounded through the moving air. Gentle and swift it sounded warm like a stallion's last step upon the rocky shore of a creek after days of trotting through desert sands. Quick and crisp at first, then rounding out as its pitch grew deeper, thicker and more so as it reverberated through the open air.

The man's gaze met the birds. Old eyes beheld the luster and grace that accompanied the winged creature. Calm majesty stood upon the crooked tree within the man's reach. The majestic bird stood like a still night in the midst of summer when elegant flowers and lush, green grass lie mostly concealed beneath the misted shroud of darkness and are visible only by the faint light that falls from the heavens. Sparkling stars and slivers of moonlight illuminate the bold colors only slightly and a mist of fantasy fills the air and any viewers are filled with a state of altered reality. These are the nights when the tangible and ethereal embrace in their beholders view. Thus the crow stood upon the tree. He was the still night; his eyes were the moon.

The shiny bird sits there within my reach. If I reached for him would he fly away? The tree bent and waved in the growing wind. The bird hovered upon the swaying branch gazing at the man who peered back. *He just sits there calm and relaxed. The wind doesn't even seem to touch him.* Slowly the man reached his scarred hand for the bird. The crow stretched his wings, ruffled his feathers and leapt into the breeze.

“Wait! Take me with you.” The man was tired of his aches and pains. He was tired of the dust; tired of the wind that always pushed against him; tired of the earth's pull upon his old back. He wanted to fly—to join the bird upon the wind. He wanted to leave his body and soar. He yearned for that still summer's night that awaited him beyond the shroud of darkness—the light that shone behind glowing eyes and called him to a place of rest.

The bird slowly fluttered away and the wind slowed to a gentle breeze. There stood the tree upon the rocky ground. Its green leaves were mixed with grey and still it fought to keep the green. It fought to stay alive. It clung to life as like its bark clung to its trunk. And next to the tree a man stood. He had lived his life. His continual struggles against the winds of time had made him strong. Still, he was alone.

“You are a strong tree. You will survive a lot more wind.”

As if in reply to his words the tree quivered and its silver and green leaves began to wither. Its trunk dried and cracked as its pale bark descended to the dust and stone below. Brown leaves crumbled and drifted away upon the breeze. Soon only the trunk remained. That too crumbled and fell, piece by piece into the departing wind.

“Fate! You villain. The tree was still green.”

The winds blew gently rustling the sand. The man’s hair and beard drifted up and down. His cloak fluttered to and fro. Still he stood strong against the wind with his staff in hand—his scarred, cracked hand. A tear ran down his wrinkled face and dripping from his nose lifted into the wind.