When Summer Comes

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THE SUN crept down through the tall, bushy tree-tops to chase the shadows from the damp trail. Over the valley floated a haze of a timeless quality, drifting in and out of the silent mountains, creating a world made for listening and watching; yet I felt like skipping, singing, shouting, running, all at the same time. It was the nostalgia of old worlds mingled with the new, and it gave promise of more worlds to conquer.

From across the valley came the harshness of a crow screaming its message, and I thought of Indians, buffalo, and birch-bark canoes. I was Deerslayer again: treading the old trails of imagination, fighting the old battles that never end, seeing again friends who never really die. My vision was a little dimmer and the voices were a little fainter, but the feeling was still there — the warmth of familiarity.

Traveling over the forest trails brought back to me something of the vitality of living, something that I missed when I traveled where the trees were sparser. I wanted to live every day beyond my sixteen years, not to be stifled as the lives of some persons were. Here in the forest I was free of the grip of normality: the grip of death.
When my stomach told me it was noon, I stopped by a stream that flowed through the deepest part of the forest, and ate my small lunch. It was a beautiful spot; one that I had never found before. Newly formed grass flowed before a warm breeze, whispering softly, gossiping about the slightly mad trickle of water that chuckled to itself as it staggered down the mountain side. In a way, it seemed both hilarious and sinister.

"Little upstart, who are you to think that you can lick the world with persistancy? Be careful, blades of grass, lest this mighty torrent eat away your home."

When I finished eating, I laid my head back against an ancient oak and closed my eyes, content to spend the rest of the day listening to the sounds of the forest. I must have dozed, because when I opened my eyes there was an old man sitting on a rock across the stream from me.

It was surprise enough to find that I wasn't alone, but it was an even greater surprise to see the outlandish manner of dress of my visitor. He had snow-white hair that contrasted violently with his coal-black eyes, and he wore a green jacket, brown trousers, a red scarf tied tightly about his neck, and a tiny brown derby perched neatly on top of his head. Laced to his feet were wooden sandals.

"Who are you?"

He smiled. "What does it matter? You are here for your reasons and I am here for mine. A traveler from nowhere, going nowhere. A memory, a gesture, a few words, a handful of dust. Maybe mad, or the world, or both of us just a little. Perhaps our reasons are the same, perhaps not, but here we are just the same."

I blinked at the torrent of words. He wasn't the sort of person that I was used to meeting.

"I must be dreaming."

"Perhaps."

I looked around for some confirmation that I was dreaming, but the sky was still blue, the grass was still grass, and the trees were still trees. My skin smarted when I pinched my arm and my head hurt where I tried to pull out a handful of hair, but my vision of the old man did not so much as quiver.
“But where did you come from?”

He touched his finger to his chin and gazed at a tiny patch of sky that showed itself above the trees. “From the past, I think. I’ve been traveling for so long that, honestly, I’m hard pressed to remember why. A transient in a world of transients. Let’s see now, was it the real or the unreal? Ah, yes! It was the unreal. Dear me yes, it was.” He sighed.

I was firmly decided that he must be an escaped lunatic, but I thought it best to humor him. He didn’t actually look dangerous; he only sounded that way. As long as he stayed on his side of the stream I felt safe from any harm that he might be capable of doing. But I stood up, in case I had to run, and stretched my stiff legs. The little old man sat firmly attached to his rock.

“You say that you are a traveler. Are you just sightseeing or have you a purpose in traveling?”

He was so thoughtful and quiet that I didn’t think that he heard me, so I asked him again.

“Are you looking for something?”

“No no no no!” He shook his head violently. “I’m not actually traveling, it’s more like I’m running. Looking for something? Oh, no! I’m running because I found what I was looking for! Does that sound strange to you? No matter, the truth is always strange to the world.” He tilted his head to one side and looked at me with a wistful expression. “Do you know what irony is, son? It’s spending the other half running away from what you found. The irony? I found the thing that I was looking for in my own mind!”

He stared at the ground for a long time before he spoke again. This time it was in a barely audible whisper.

“Only once in a lifetime is it ever Spring. But where does Spring go when Summer comes? Oh, memory: you mirror of the world of real, that maketh irony the cruel deceiver of the heart. What once the hand did hold affirm, thou makest gossamer instead. Is not the loss of one enough without thou makest real the loss anew with each inevitable thought?”

I saw happiness, hate, fear, and sorrow in his face, as if each thought were slurred with every other thought, yet, each a separate memory. There was a smile on his lips, there
were tears in his eyes, and every feature of his face was racked with pain. What could he have lost that could cause so much misery? No! He had said that it was something that he had found. It was a perplexing problem.

“What do you mean?”

He looked up after a few seconds and tried to smile, but it came out all wrong. “Some day, son! Some day you’ll find out. We all do, when it’s too late.” Then he stood up. “Please excuse me, son, but I must get back to the world. I’ve over-stayed my time as it is. Will you be coming with me?”

I wanted to go, but something held me back. Wait just a little longer, I told myself, before you cross the stream. There are so many places in the rest of the world that you haven’t seen, so little time.

“No, I won’t be coming with you for a while yet. Will I ever see you again?”

“Yes, son. Every day, a glimpse here and there, a flash of color. Once you’ve met me, I’m hard to avoid. I turn up in the strangest places.”

Then, with silent foot-steps, he turned and walked away from me. The strange, sad, funny old man; gone as quickly as he came.

I spent very little time in the forest after that day. There was high school to graduate from, after that, the army, then I came to college. Each new experience took me further from the forest and closer to the old man. I never quite made it back.

When I finally met the old man again, he had changed considerably. His clothes were no longer outlandish, nor his appearance quite so strange. Each day gave me new tools to work with, new methods, and more insight into the world and its workings. I too lost something, then found that I had lost it. At last I could sympathize with the little old man, but the sympathy seemed a hollow thing. Ten years it took, to understand the words he had told to me; ten short years too late.

When Summer comes, the trees are trees and the mountains are mountains. Captain Nemo docks his ship, the philosopher caterpillar curls up to sleep, D’Artagnan puts
his sword away, and Peter Pan flies back to Never-Never Land. No more trips down the Mississippi, or haunted houses, or talking animals. No more dolls, or fleecy animals in a summer sky, or the roar of dandelions shimmering across a grassy plain. The buffalo fade, the stars dim, and the moon returns to rock. When Summer comes, the world dies, but the dream remains.

Winter Night

by Tom Harkin

The winter nights pass on
(from gray-white day
to gray-white day,
from cold, empty nights
with fluorescent lights
shining through my window
on your empty pillow)
in silence, save for the wind
swishing through the trees
and the crack of a twig —
the memory of a swishing dress
and the click of a closing door.