There is No Weakest Link

by Alexander Leone

In the great ocean, there was a fish that was the only one of its kind. It swam to and fro looking for other fish like it, but it could find none — all the other fish has spots where he did not have spots or stripes where he did not have stripes. He was lonely for a long time. He could play with the other fish, and talk to the other fish, but still, there was no other fish that was like him, except in that he or she was a fish.

He pouted, and he mourned, and he searched, and he queried, but all to no avail. He was unique, one of a kind, and he did not like it one bit.

One day, while swimming about in his usual manner, he came across a fish who was more giant that any he had ever seen before.

“What is your name?” the unique fish asked the huge one.

“I am a Whale,” the Whale said. “What is your name?”

“I am called Fish,” Fish said, for no one had ever given him another name.

“Well, Fish,” Whale said, “I think we should be good friends.”

And they were.

Time passed, and they became very good friends, much better than they had initially imagined. They became such good friends, in fact, that they decided they wanted to marry each other.

“But how can that be,” Whale pouted, “since we are not the same kind of fish? Is that allowed? Is that possible?”

But Fish, determined that nothing should be impossible and remembering how he had found so good a friend in so vast an ocean, set off to find out if such a special kind of friendship as he desired would be possible, or at least allowed, if not possible. He swam to every bay, to every crevice in the sea, to discover whether there was any other fish who had ever married another fish who was not of the same kind as itself. In every

city he inquired, on every rock and mountain and valley, but he could find none. Every fish kept to its own kind in marriage, and Fish was deeply grieved, since there were no other fish of his own kind in the whole world, and, besides which, he loved another. After a time, worried that Whale may meet another whale and forget all about him, Fish returned as fast as his tail would push him. He found Whale and told her all about his searches, and the two of them grieved together that they would never be able to marry. Still, they were good friends, and such as them were not likely to be shaken by something so trivial as an impossibility. They stayed good friends, therefore, although they did not marry.

Problems arose, however, as they began to do more of their daily activities together. Fish was much smaller than Whale, and would need to swim hard to keep up with her: Whale realized this and offered to push him along with her fins, but every time she did, he would grow sick and disoriented, and not be able to swim on his own. Likewise, Whale could not go into the smaller places that Fish could, even with all of Fish's help, and so they could never play hide and seek, or hunt for food together, especially since each ate such different foods from the other. They began to weary with these things, seeing no end to the small difficulties of each day, and each still desiring above all else to be married to the other.

One day, Fish saw a little worm, the kind he often used for food. He began swimming towards it, and it began swimming away from him, but when it saw that it was futile and that he would be eaten whether it wanted to or not, the worm turned and began to plead to Fish:

"Please, do not eat me. I can be of great use to you. Please do not eat me — I have a family and children they would be lost if I left them."

Fish, remembering how he loved Whale, took pity on the worm and did not eat him.

"I will spare you, worm, but tell me, what use can you be to me? How

can you help me?"

"Just name the thing and I shall do it for you; I shall be your slave whenever we should meet henceforth."

Then Fish happened upon an idea. "Do you know if there is someone in charge of who can marry who, someone who makes the rules about marriage, who I could procure a small favor from?"

"I know of a small fish with a shell who is said to know all things. It has four fins where other have two — it will know the answer to your question."

So Fish told Whale what the worm had said, and they bid each other goodbye again, and Fish once more set off to find this shelled-fish that the worm had spoken of. He found him lying on a rock in the very center of the ocean, where the sun from above could still reach the bottom, and the water was clear and moderately peaceful. The shell-fish, indeed, had four fins to his own two, and they were strange and wondrous to behold.

Fish approached him. "I have heard that you will know the answer to my question," Fish said to the shelled-fish.

"It is possible that I shall know it," the shelled-fish said.

"I am in love with a Whale," Fish explained, "and we wish to marry one another, yet neither of us know if this is possible, or even if it is allowed. We beg of you, tell us who governs these things, that we may ask of Him the favor of each others' fin in marriage."

The shelled-fish (though he looked less like a fish with every moment Fish looked at him) sat quietly for several minutes. Finally he spoke:

"You should go home to your Whale and ask her what she would like more than anything in the world, after being married to you. Ask her this, and return with the answer, and I will tell you what you desire to know."

So Fish returned to Whale and asked her what she desired more than anything in the world, after being married to him. She thought for a moment, then answered:

“I should very much like to see my mother and father again, for I was lost from them when I was very young, and I do not know either who or where they are.”

Fish thought this was a good answer, so he returned to the shelled-fish to give it to him. But while Fish had been gone, the shelled-fish, not knowing the answer to how the two of them should get married, went to the source of all his knowledge: a cave in a gulf near the center of the earth. He swam into the darkness and waited for a reply to come to the question he had in his mind.

He waited a long time for the answer to come to him. Finally, a voice spoke out from the walls of the cave:

“Fish wishes to know whether or not he can ever marry Whale, correct?”

“Yes, it is,” the shelled-fish said.

“He must protect his children. Then and only then can he be married to his love.”

The shelled-fish nodded and left, pleased to have been given such an easy, ambiguous answer with so little work done on his part. He returned to his rock and waited as though he had never left. When Fish found him, he was sitting in the exact same manner as when he had left him.

“Oh, great and wise fish that you are,” Fish said to the shelled-fish with four fins, “My love has declared that, after marrying myself, she would very much like to see her family again.”

Then the shelled-fish began to weave a web of words: “And this answer has been very well given,” he began, “for her family is lost to her, as she is lost to you. Therefore, you must spend your days from now until your death in protecting your children, though you have none at the moment to protect. You must start now and do not delay — for if ever they come to harm, you shall never be married to your love. But if the great God above deems your

efforts worthy of reward, he shall reward you and give you what you desire."

Now Fish thanked the shelled-fish and retreated; but he was exceedingly confused. How was he to protect his children if he had no children to protect? He thought long and hard about this convoluted statement, endeavoring to grasp its veiled intricacies. He could do no such thing. His head swam with the possible meanings of the oracle, but none manifested themselves as clear to him.

One day, an immature friend of his and Whale's, an eel whose name was Giles, was irritating the sleepy old sharks in the cove, as he often liked to do. He would move in quick as a flash and bop one of them on the head with his tail and then move away even quicker than he had come in — and he moved away so fast, that they could rarely even see him, much less retaliate. After months of this game, the sharks began to tire of it, and became much less sleepy and acted much less old. They would wait for him to come in at them, and snap when he did; but this just made the game all the more fun to little Giles, who could weave in and out among them like a piece of dust floating in between a school of tuna, or something alike to that. Their jaws would close, and his tail would flit out of them, and escape to safety, and hid among the seaweed, and they would never get him.

This particular day, however, the sharks were particularly upset, and determined to be particularly swift and crafty, so that they would rid themselves of an old irritation and thereafter return to their sleepy old ways. On this particular day, then, when Giles swam in quickly, like a breadthless line through a geometry textbook, the sharks moved in and bit, all at the same time, all at different places. One of them happened to clip his tail between two teeth, and they tore a hole in his skin and in his treasured muscles, so that he could not swim away. They all began biting furiously at him, and he did his best to avoid their jaws, though he could not escape. He began crying for help.

Passing by these caves on his way to get food for himself was Fish (Whale did all her own hunting, since she ate such different foods). When fish heard such a good friend crying so pitifully for help, he could do nothing else but rush into the fray, and drag out his wounded friend, beating back sharks both on the way in and out. When he had just escaped with Giles, though, and when the churlish and playful eel had begun to swim away in search of a place to recover and heal himself, one of the sharks managed to bit Fish square across the tail, pulling him back into the fray, and setting all the other sharks on him. They would have nearly devoured him, had not Whale heard the commotion and, tearing over to the noise as fast as she could, seen her love be pulled into the midst of the fight and, heart made fast with terror, plunged into the midst of them, scattering sharks everywhere and drawing out the body of her beloved Fish with her. The sharks, after they recovered, realized that no one would bother them every after, and contented themselves with being sleepy as they had been for years before and would continue to be for years after.

Whale, however, brought Fish to a safe distance before she began to fret over his torn, lifeless body. First she weeped, then she wailed, then she beat his body and commanded it to come to life. But nothing prevailed. Then the voice of wisdom whom the shelled-fish had heard in the cave spoke forth to Whale, saying:

“Because your love has proven himself worthy of you by giving his life for even the most childish of fish, I shall grant you what you have desired. To Fish, I give again the gift of life and a beautiful coat of golden scales. To you, I give the same form as Fish, and a new name, Sayen, and permission to be married. I also give you the promise that you will have the most beautiful and fortunate children in the whole of the sea, and that I will watch over them, and make sure they come to no harm.”

At that moment, a bright flash filled the sea (which the sharks quickly

recovered from) and Fish was alive again, and next to him was his beautiful bride, Sayen, whom he recognized at once to be Whale, though her golden coat was astonishing.

"To you also, Fish," the voice of wisdom said, "I give a new name: Shakil, for your bravery has made you beautiful."

Shakil and Sayen lived happily together for many years together and had many, beautiful children. Their family had the only golden fish in the sea, and they were very proud of it.

Giles, however, never saw the golden fish family in his entire life. After the incident with the sharks, he became very scared of them, and went far, far away from them, to the a part of the sea on the other side of the world. He lived between two rocks in the bottom of the sea, and didn't come out except to find food, which he didn't need much of, since he ate only seaweed. He had no friends, and he didn't want them. He tripped older fish when he could, or hit younger ones over the head.

One day, all the seaweed on the ocean floor near his home vanished. No other seaweed-eating fish lived near him as far as he knew, and the temperature of the water hadn't changed or the sun shined any less down on the seabed (although it shone very little anyways, as a general rule). He couldn't continue living where he was, obviously, so he began swimming, farther and farther away from his safe home in between the rocks. He swam until he came to a little reef by an island on which lived people of a great constitution, who could dive to great depths for great lengths of time and not die, not faint, and come up alive and well, as though they had just been resting for hours and had all manner of back massages and good things given to them. Here there was seaweed abundantly, for the people cultured the land in a way that made the seabed fertile and rich for the growth of seaweed. Giles was very pleased with the sight of the vast meadows of seaweed, and he settled right in, eating and hiding and being slightly less

churlish than he usually was. He was nevertheless still extremely unsocial, and none of the fish who lived near him liked him at all.

One young fish, however, persisted on coming near him, even though Giles bopped him over the head at every chance, and swatted him in the side, and every other thing he could think of to annoy the poor child — but the fishling stood firm and did not retreat like the other fishes.

The people on the island would dive and collect shells quite frequently, for their beautiful rainbow color. They would buff and polish and shine the shells ‘til they would reflect the moonlight on a cloudy night, and they would give them to their older and esteemed members of their tribe. The people called the shells “bellis” and they were beautiful for even the most primitive creature to behold, after they had been prepared by the men and women of the tribe of the divers. The process that each bellis went through was intensive. Each shell first was cleaned of common dirt and sand, then boiled in hot water, then in hot oil. They were held cup side down and sand was poured over them to smooth the outside surface further, then they were held cup side up and filled with running sand while they were spun in a circle, the circular movement smoothing the inside surface further. Several stages of sand-smoothing were acted out, each stage involving increasingly smaller grains of sand. When the long and laborious sand-smoothing was through, each shell was subjected to an inspection of the most rigorous kind: the poorer and less brave among them could have built houses out of the rejected shells had the chiefs not ordered the rejects crushed and the powder buried in a cave in a mountain about a mile from the shoreline. The inspection was carried out like this: if they could rub a delicate amitia leaf over the shell all over and not so much as scratch the leaf, the shell passed; if the chief ran his nose over every part of the shell and did not feel a single bump, it passed; and if, having been filled with water, and after the only trained singer in the tribe (for there was only one at a time, according to

law) sang the perfect and sacred pitch to the shell when it had been placed on the sacred table, if then the ripples formed in perfect circles from the center; if all these things were true, then the shells were considered to have passed the inspection, and then and only then were they called bellis, after the old story. Then they were treated with the utmost respect, and washed once more in water — then they were sealed and hardened by being baked in the sun for a specified length of time — then they were placed carefully on a cloth in a tent which held all the bellises that had not been given out to the people yet. The bellis was worn around the neck tied with a soft cord resilient to being broken by means of both force and water, that is, being worn down through weathering. A good bellis and a good cord, then, could last for a lifetime around your neck, if you could first earn it, and if you were a member of the tribe to begin with, for no outsiders could acquire them.

Giles lived blissfully unaware of all this below the surface of the water surrounding the little tribe. The little fishling that had first provided him with a great deal of entertainment and easy sport now grew irksome to him, and he endeavored to chase the little creature away. But to no avail: the fishling followed him everywhere all the day, whether Giles wanted him to or not. He began to not even leave when Giles went to his crack in between the rocks to hide for the night and sleep. The fishling waited outside for him, never really sleeping completely — for if Giles tried to sneak off, the fishling would wake up and follow after him. The fishling never said a word — he just followed, usually in silence, sometimes with a gurgle that sounded like words, was more intelligent that a baby's babbling, but yet no thoughts were made recognizable to Giles through them.

The seaweed was exceptionally good, and for this reason Giles stayed. He liked to explore sometimes, since it let him forget that he was being followed, and gave him false pleasure in the imagining that he was the surveyor of untouched lands, since no doubt other fish had been there

before him. He would swim under the coral and through the coral — poking at abandoned homes and shells and anything that looked generally harmless and unlikely to best him if it came to a fight or a race.

One day he stumbled across an empty shell-fish — that is, there was the shell, but no fish inside of it. The two halves were lying on the seabed uninhabited, and so, of course, Giles had to go take a look inside of it.

The shell was big enough for him to fit inside, and the the whole was big enough for him to slip comfortably through, so what did Giles do but slip inside and swim around, turning and not swimming in a circle, since there was no room inside the shell for such activity.

Suddenly, without warning, the bottom half of the shell violently hit him against his stomach, and the water was knocked out of his gills. He took a long time in recovering from the blow, and was so stunned and disarranged that he could not find the opening through which he had come into the shell. The bottom of the shell continued to grow closer to him, and he suddenly felt a tad afraid that something outside the shell was moving it away from the sea floor, away from his home as he had known it for the short time he lived there. And he was frightened. Very frightened.

Suddenly, the shell began to fill with air from the top down. Giles pressed himself against the floor and tried not to move — he couldn't survive in air for very long, this he knew, but he didn't know at all where he was being taken. The air stopped coming in, and he was left lying in a small puddle at the bottom of the inside of two halves of a rainbow-colored shell. The shell continued bumping along, going wherever it was going — he tried his best to lie still and not take up energy or water. The shell was jolted, and lay still for a long time. He could feel subtle movements, but he tried to ignore them. His fear was burning through him into the shell beneath him... and passing out into the outside world, which he had no knowledge of. He wanted to have no knowledge of it. He had felt safe between his rocks... but now he

was facing certain death, he knew it. If the last remaining drops of water ran out, or dried out, he would suffocate before long.

Suddenly, his shell was lifted, it tipped and he could feel the last of the water be replaced by air. He began gasping for water. Not knowing what was in the world outside his shell, he feared it. The shell jostled around terribly, throwing him from side to side... the fear was too much, much more than the sharks — with the sharks he knew how fast they moved and what they looked like and how big they were and what parts of their bodies he could most easily slip in between. Now, he knew nothing except that he could not stay where he was. Like the famine that drove him to the reef he had called home for a long time now, the open air drove him to escape.

Wiggling raggedly to the opening in the shell, through which streamed a light that looked foreign and strange, he threw his long, eel body as far as he could, into the unknown, through the jostling and quick movements.

The light blinded him. He fell through air, harsh and grating on his skin — then he was hit on all sides with an astounding force, and then he was surrounded by water again. Swimming as deep as he could, away from the light, he found a tunnel, a crack — and he just kept swimming through it. He swam as though his life depended on it, through the water-filled tunnel, breathing freely and swimming hard. Then, suddenly, he was back on the reef. It looked far more like home than it had ever looked before, and he was happy to see it.

When the little fishling found him (which didn't take long at all, for the little thing was frantic to see Giles be carried off by a monster with fins the like of which he had never seen before), Giles was so pleased with not only being restored to health and life, but with having a friend, that he left of being cruel to him, and treated the creature as his own son (though he never had any for all his days), and the two played together in the coral, but stayed ever after far away from shells of any kind.

The monster the fishling had seen was, in fact, a boy diver from the tribe of the divers who had been collecting rainbow-colored shells out of which to make bellises. One of the shells he picked was, of course, the one in which Giles was exploring, though the boy had no conception of that at the moment he put it inside his bag to bring to shore. He was the son of one of the lowly shell-collectors, who were held in much less esteem than the bellis-makers and chiefs and warriors. Their job was considered inconsequential, since nearly any shell of the right kind could become a bellis with enough hard labor. He was required to collect a hundred shells a week, only five of which usually made it to becoming bellises. He would bring the bag into the village with the strap slung over his shoulder, his hips bent away from the bag and his body swaying with the bag of shells so as to be in unison with them and not bash against and break any. Every day, he would bring in his day's bag full of shells; every day he would take each shell out of the bag and place each one in a row on the cloth for the bellis-maker. This particular day, he took the shells out one by one, like he always did. He shook the water out of each one before setting them in rows on the cloth. But on the seventeenth shell, as he shook it, Giles fell out — a purple, snake-like thing to the eyes of the shell boy — out of the shell and into the washing well that had been dug many, many years ago for the washing of the shells and bellis. It was fed by an underground spring that was said to be sacred, and the water that washed the shells was said to be of the purest kind.

So, when the boy saw the eel slide out of the shell and into the well, he was astonished. The only creatures he had ever seen living in the rainbow shells were small and lumpy, not long and skinny like an snake or rope. This must be an entirely new kind of creature. The bellis-maker also saw the eel fall out, and he stopped and stared in astonishment a ″s he fell into the well. He and the chief had often wondered from whence the making of bellises had come from, and who oversaw their creation, who had inspired the first

bellis-maker so many years ago to craft so strong and beautiful a thing. It could not be the blob that commonly was found in the shells underwater — that was not near noble enough a species of creature to come up with the greatest beauty that, in his opinion, the world had ever seen. He rushed to the well, dropping the shell in his hands and thrusting both arms into the waters. The snake was gone. He knelt with his arms in the water in shock. He knew that the purple water snake was the deity they had been searching for, the god of the sacred bellis. He solidified the image of the falling purple line in his mind, so that he would never forget his first and possibly only glimpse of the god to whom he had devoted his life works and service.

The bellis-maker talked to the chief and told him about his discovery, the like of which neither of them had ever seen before. They decided that the boy, whose name was Petrarshi, was the one who had coaxed the god out of the shell, who dwelled in the shells in order to supervise their growth and care; and therefore, since it was the boy who had coaxed out the god, it should be him who would collect all the shells, to give them opportunity to see the god again, and perhaps ask it how else they could serve it or what other things they could do in its honor. The other boys were taken off of shell-collecting duty, and Petrarshi was given a full time job and special privileges. But, after three weeks, they realized that the god would not appear the same way twice, and was clever enough not to appear the same way twice, so they returned the other boys to their duties and made Petrarshi the first priest of the Violet Bellis God, who had appeared to them in the form of a water snake. The only thing the bellis-maker and chief agreed would be consistent in the god's appearances was his violet color, so Petrarshi was instructed to keep his eye out for all things violet, to treat them as sacred, and to report to both the bellis-maker and chief all purple things that he came across. He began to explore the area around their village, up to the mountains, which came down to the sea on both sides and cut them off

effectively from the rest of the world. No one could come in and no one could come out without crossing the mountains or swimming for a mile in either direction, and, although they could dive for long periods of time, no one had ever felt the need to venture out; since they had food and drink for their health and bellises for beauty and honor, they felt and indeed were content, as far as isolated divers go.

Petrarshi explored the entire coastline and forest inland, all the land between the coast and the mountains, and he could find nothing of that same purple color. The boys who dove to collect shells were informed to look for the violet water snake again, or any other purple-colored thing under the water, in case he should show his face, but none of them ever saw it again. In fact, after nothing had been found, the chief and bellis-maker were all but ready to give up the search. But Petrarshi, wishing to continue in his quest and not be daunted by something so trivial as the invisibility of a deity. He began to journey into the mountains, taking bread and fish and staying there for many days, drinking water our of the fresh mountain springs, and exploring rocks that no man had explored before. He would be gone for many days, then return, having eaten food and having acquired many stories to tell, but with no news as to a purple or violet thing that the people could know was the Violet Bellis God. He loved these journeys, even though they yielded no results, because he was alone, and not being bossed about by the bellis-maker and the other boys. He could think out there, and wonder what the god really looked like, if not a water snake, because for the great and beautiful Violet Bellis God to truly look like a lowly water snake and not just to appear like one was absurd and, therefore, impossible, if not improbable.

He watched every creature to see if he could see the image of the god in it, but he could not. He didn't understand why he had been special enough to coax the god out of hiding, and so he had begun to doubt that he had in fact coaxed it. Why, he also wondered, did the god hide at all? What did he

have to hide? The bellis was the most beautiful thing in the world, the chief said at the ceremonies awarding them to their bravest warriors — why would the creator of something so beautiful want to hide from them? Was he fragile and they very dangerous? These sorts of things he thought about as he walked in the mountains, climbing, sitting, watching the animals, not finding but still looking for the purple color that was the sign of divinity.

He came across, one day, a bird that had hurt its wing flying in the mountains and was sitting on a rock, not moving, being very still. The one wing was straight while the other was crooked — Petrarshi picked up the bird and held him to get a closer look. The bird was black with a yellow and a white stripe on each wing. He looked at it carefully — a single feather on the bird's tail was a dark shade of purple. It scratched his hand — he held the creature more carefully in his hands, as though it were a delicate jar and his mere touch could break it. The god of the beauty of bellis had shown itself. What if it was a goddess? he thought. A goddess of beauty certainly made more sense than a god of beauty. It made no difference, though — it, he, she had shown herself to him again. At least in a smaller way. But the bird was hurt. He could not bring it to the chief and bellis-maker: they would tear it pieces if they got their hands on it. He would have to make sure it became well, and did not become an exhibit for the people in the village. It couldn't get food; it would die without his help. He carried it down into the forest, at the edge of the mountains where he was sure nobody would go, and made a nest for it where three branches met together about two men's heights off the ground out of sticks for stability and grass for comfort. He placed the bird in the nest, then went to find food for it. He hunted for worms and bugs most of the day, and fed them to the purple-tailed bird out of his hand. When it was full, the bird tipped its head forward and went to sleep, a deep sleep, free of cares and evils and pain — the kind of sleep that makes you forget that your arm is broken because you are just so happy to surrender and rest for the

first time in a long while.

For a while, Petrarshi watched the bird sleep. Then he went back into the village and told no one about his findings, but told them all about the other things he had seen that day. The bellis-maker and the chief asked him if he had any news of the god appearing, and he always answered no, but every day when he went out into the mountains, on his way out he would feed the bird, and again on his way back into the village. The bird's wing quickly healed itself, and soon it could fly just as well as any other bird, but, even so, it continued to sleep in the nest that Petrarshi had made for it. Soon, it took up the habit of following Petrarshi about in his journeyings, and several times it tried to follow him back to the village, but he would take it in his hands and put it back in his nest, and after a while it understood. When it came down from the mountain, it stayed in the nest, resting as when its wing had been broken. They would explore together, in a way: the boy walking and the bird flying, one on land and one in the heavens, each always remembering that the other was there, but forgetting who he was sometimes. For to the bird, Petrarshi was nothing more than a boy, while to the village he ˇ was their priest; and to Petrarshi, the bird was nothing more than a divine friend, while to the bellis-maker and priest, it was the manifestation of a god to whom they had pledged their service for life. And Petrarshi and the bird were very happy.

Now one day one of the other children in the village, jealous of Petrarshi's special privileges and social standing in the village, followed him into the forest to see what he did all the day, for the child was sick of diving for shells, and much preferred to be out walking, especially in the mountains, which he had admired from afar since he was a toddler. He followed Petrarshi, who was oblivious and, furthermore, ambivalent to whether or not anyone followed him, because he was so happy to start out that day to explore the mountains with his purple-tailed friend. This child knew nothing of

the color purple, since he had never seen it, except in the sky over the waters as the sun set on certain days, but even then no one had ever bothered pointing it out to him. He had learned to dive some time after the incident at the well with the purple eel-who-was-the-bellis-god, so he had been spared needing to look for the color purple in the world underneath the waves. But now, he went after Petrarshi, quietly, stealthily, so that he may not be detected. And indeed, he was not for the good part of the day.

He followed Petrarshi to the nest where the purple-tailed bird lived, and he watched as the winged creature woke up, and Petrarshi greeted it, and the two of them set off. He followed them for most of the day, and watched their every move. They seemed more to him to be playing than searching or exploring truly, and Petrarshi seemed far happier than the jealous boy had feared him to be. It was all he could do not to run up to the “bellis god priest” and strangle him then and there, or throw him down the side of the mountain and watch his body break on the rocks below, but then people would wonder what had become of Petrarshi, and see him coming down from the mountains, not having been diving, and he would be found out and punished, which was something he very much wished to avoid. Therefore, after watching them for most of the day, he turned and, careful not to reveal himself to them, went back to the village.

When he got back to the village, the child was reprimanded and told that he should have been diving with the other children; but he told them about how he went out to the mountains to watch Petrarshi explore with his bird following him, and he thought nothing of it, because he had never heard any stories of Petrarshi’s exploits, or at least very few. But the others in the village said to each other, “We’ve never heard him tell us about this bird, why is he keeping this secret from us?” And when he came back they made him tell all about it, and what it was that was so secret he could not have told them earlier. He told them, that he had found the bird as a friend, and

that he traveled with it often into the mountains, and that he had forgotten to tell them at the time, and that it had become so natural a part of his journeys to him that he had forgotten since to mention him. He did not mention the purple feather on the tail, because he had forgotten completely, of so little concern was it to him. Some of the people said they wished to see this bird, and Petrarshi had no objections, since he did not remember the purple feather. He did not go on a journey for a week after that, and after a week he had completely forgotten about the request to see his bird companion, but certain people had not, and they insisted on going with him to meet the creature, and he could not deny them their request, so they set off together, Petrarshi and the villagers. When they came to the tree, the bird was already awake and sitting on the branch above its nest, for it had been wakened by the noise the villagers made; and when they went to look at it, it stayed out of reach; but their curiosity made them beg Petrarshi to bring it down to them that they might see it. So he did.

Once they had gotten it in their hands, (or rather, in Petrarshi's, for it was terribly uncomfortable with anything they did and refused to be caught by anyone but Petrarshi), they looked at the tail feathers and, lo and behold, one of them was a dark, barely distinguishable shade of no color other than purple.

One of the adults impulsively grabbed for the creature, but it flew immediately out of Petrarshi's hands and into the vast sky above, so fast and swift that Petrarshi could not catch it back, though I am sure he did not try to, for that would have been the most ridiculous thing in the world. Can you imagine if you were holding tightly onto your friend, and someone fell upon him (or her) to seize him: would you continue to hold on to your friend, thinking that he would be safer in your arms, or would you allow him (or her) to fly for their life. If you are not convinced, imagine that your friend had wings, and that their assailants were human. For that is the funny thing

about humans and birds: as humans, we are constrained to anywhere where there is air to breathe and something sturdy to walk on, but birds use air both for breathing and supporting themselves, so that wherever there is air, a bird can be. This leaves such a small fraction of the earth inhabitable for humans, that it would be no wonder if a given human grew discontent with their ability to move from one place to another, or rather a lack thereof, and with the impossibility of flight, while it would be no small miracle if a human should be not only contented with walking the ground but still discontented with how impossible it is for humans to fly — that is, to content oneself with walking while still wanting to fly. For in so far as a creature can fly, the villagers believe, it is closer to the heavens.

They were indignant, and stormed back to the village to report what they had seen to the chief and bellis-maker. When the two of them had heard about the purple feather, they grew excited and agitated, and questioned Petrarshi to see if he had already knew about it — by now he had remembered seeing it before and could not lie. He told them how he had kept it from them because he was afraid that they would capture it and keep it in a cage and do all sorts of experiments on it, and he did not believe that was how one should treat a god. They denied it aloud, but in their hearts they knew it was true, and were ashamed, and therefore became even more angry at Petrarshi. He was removed from his position as priest and assigned to his regular shift at the reef again, one hundred shells a week, and an adult was hired as his replacement. Petrarshi still went out to the forest when no one was watching him, and back to the nest he had built for the bird, but the branch was broken, probably by the new priest of the bellis god, and his bird friend never came to the old tree again. Six times he snuck out into the forest to look for him, and six times he came back unsuccessful. But on the seventh time, after he had given up hope for ever finding the bird again and was on his way back to the village for the final time, he looked up and saw his

friend sitting high on a twig, very near the open sky, yet exposed from this angle to a human standing on earth and stones and such. Petrarshi looked up and smiled and waved, and the bird turned its head to the side by way of greeting: he looked sorrowful. Then, without a word from either of them, the bird leapt up off the twig and flew away, with much slower beating of the wings than he had ever used before, and with a sort of lament in each pulse. “Good... bye... Pe... trar... shi...” he said without words:

“Be... con... tent.”

The boy never saw the bird again, but lived out the rest of his life content in the village.

The bird flew for days, over the mountains and over rivers and streams, over forests and plains and deserts and fields and valleys, flying without stopping, with no purpose apparent but with prominent determination.

He landed on a tree outside of a castle. The tree was green and tall and had many leaves, but no fruit, even though it was the time of year for fruits to grow on it. And he sang, and inside the castle, a king heard his song. And the king stopped and listened, and he was enraptured for a time by the pureness and beauty of the melody. The song stopped shortly, because the bird was tired, and the king wanted the singing to start again, and he was jealous because the bird could sing so beautifully when he could not, so he sent to have the bird brought inside. But when the guards went out to capture the bird, it flew up and away from them, even though it was already very tired from having flown such a long way. The guards reported to the king that the bird could not be caught, and he was miffed and, furthermore, rather upset and mildishly peeved, so he sulked in his quarters for the rest of the day.

The castle still belonged to his father, who was older than any king before him had ever lived in the kingdom, and on his deathbed, just ready to

pass away. The kingdom had endured many difficulties since his father had fallen ill, and he, being crowned the active king of the land, began to correct as best he could whatever ills he found in the kingdom. A rebellion arose in the far reaches of the kingdom, and he squelched it, leading the armies himself. An embassy from a foreign power visited him with complaints about their respective histories, and he made peace between their kingdom and his. There was famine one year, and he rationed and ruled and got his citizens through the famine. But the years had taken their toll on him, and he was now more bitter than he had been before, because his father had had such a glorious reign, while he was stuck trying to keep the kingdom from hitting rock bottom, from going to pot, as the women in the kitchen often said of dishes that they prepared not to his liking. He was growing sick of coming so close to failure, and he was determined that, since as soon as his father died he would be given full reign of the kingdom, with all the varying powers it entailed, he would push the kingdom onto glory and success as soon as he could, as soon as he was given the power to do so. He would enact laws and put people where they needed to be... he would tell them how to live, but he would NOT stand by and let his kingdom scrap the bottom of the barrel, like a frugal housewife of one of the peasants. He would be STRONG, he decided: powerful, like his father, so that no one could deny the glory of his reign.

Every day until his father's final day, he plotted how he would save his kingdom from failure and, more importantly, mediocrity, and every night at his window the bird would sing his song, singing him to sleep, and every morning to wake him up. It was the most beautiful song in the world, and he loved it; he tried several times to have it brought inside so it would sing at his command, but each time he tried, it would fly away and stop singing, so he soon learned to let it sing when it willed and not try to capture it. He listened every night, and every night the bird sang — he loved to sing for the king, and the king loved to listen, but he was still exceedingly jealous, and,

since it was impossible to have the bird captured and brought inside, he allowed it to sing outside his room, all the while plotting how he could command it to sing to him more often. For it would never listen to his commands, no matter how forceful or persuasive they were.

The day his father died, the entire kingdom dropped their work and observed twenty four hours of mourning, the king included. The next day, he was crowned reigning monarch and set about improving his kingdom. The first thing he did was to raise taxes, so that he would have greater resources at his power to make the kingdom great. The second thing he did was to make laws to enforce taxes, so that the citizens would have every reason to obey his commands, and no reason not to. After those, he made laws recruiting more young, strong men into the army; he made laws requiring certain craftsmen, craftsmen such as blacksmiths and carpenters and silversmiths and such, laws requiring them to contribute a certain number of certain kinds of items to the state per year, on top of their regular currency tax, so that his armies would never be short on armor or weapons or chariots. Next he called a meeting with the leaders of all the surrounding kingdoms, and within a week of his coronation they were all sitting in a room in his palace together, feasting on something that he had ordered made especially for them: fried eel with turnip and cabbage, a rare delicacy in his kingdom, which the visiting rulers were much obliged to eat.

After dinner, they talked for a time about the flourishing parts of their various kingdoms, which, after a time, he interrupted with a speech that went something like the following:

“Friends, I would like to thank you for joining me here on this fine day for celebration. You no doubt remember the deeds of my father — they have been sung across the lands, minstrels have composed songs honoring them. I cannot claim to have the great skill my father had as a ruler, but mine is a great portion of it: I have kept my kingdom from disaster several times

already since he fell ill and could no longer rule. So now, my dearest friends, I would like to propose an alliance between your kingdoms and mine, that we may grow together and have the opportunity to trade between our kingdoms and, someday, we may all become a single great kingdom, the single greatest kingdom in the world. Perhaps. For the time being, let us simply join together in mutual agreement to help one another out in times of need, and to trade freely with one another, as in a time of peace. I would be greatly honored to enter into such an alliance with such brave, esteemed, powerful men as yourselves."

He was trained in rhetoric, and so he spoke beautifully and convincingly, but he spoke thusly because he was afraid, although he admitted his fear to only a part of himself and not his whole self. For if the part that constructed beautiful rhetoric knew that he was, in fact, frightened out of his wits, his wits would no longer be at his disposal, and pretty speech would be impossible.

The rulers all agreed to his proposal, and they had five identical agreements carved onto five different tablets of stone by a stoneworker the king had hired, and they swore over them that they would hold fast to the agreement, and then each carried a tablet back to their own kingdom; but the king kept one for himself, and had it hung on the wall in his bedchamber, where he admired it every morning when he woke up and every evening when he went to bed, to the infuriating unbound sound of the free and unfettered bird singing.

His kingdom grew sadder and more poor with every passing day, because many of his citizens gave nearly all they had to the crown, as a percentage, and those, naturally, had no reason to work at all once they realized that they were just being exploited for the good of the monarch; so they did less and less work, until eventually there was so little produce in the kingdom, that the king had to make laws enforcing the output of the

craftsmen. Then the people grew more miserable than ever, and they grumbled and complained openly to each other; and the bird sang still everyday for the king, although he hardly listened to it anymore, and regarded it no more than the sound of his soldiers marching in drills outside in the courtyard or the sound of dishes clattering in the kitchen when the servants opened the doors between their pots and pans and his dining room.

One day, the king called into his throne room a messenger of his who he knew very well to be a fool and a cormorant, and incapable of carrying on a tactful conversation, and said to him:

"Messenger, I have an important message for you to carry. King Melchizedek is not yet an ally of ours, and I would very much like your intelligence in the matter of securing him as our best of friends. Would you bring a gift and a message to him, saying that we wish to become allies with him in the future, and my wishes that he would return the sentiments so that we could meet in person sometime in the future, at which point I should be very happy to entertain him. Do take several dried and seasoned eels, that they may still be good to eat and to taste on the arrival, as presents to his majesty, and I should be very pleased with your success."

The fool, not realizing the scheme of his king, devoured the flattery and took in immediately to heart, after which he was the slave of the king's, while before, while he had his emotions and ego not inflated so, he was only a servant. But not, he brought the gifts and the message to King Melchizedek, three dried eels wrapped in a soft cloth, traveling days and nights and weeks to reach the kingdom, which lay across a wilderness and a river, which he took several days in finding a point at which he could cross it without spoiling the food. When he arrived, he begged audience with the king, who gladly welcomed him into his throne room, eager to know what the king could have sent a messenger so long a distance in order to tell him.

Melchizedek was a religious man. He was the leader of his kingdom's

religion, the head priest of his people, and he took both tasks very seriously: the king's leadership and the priest's. Neither was to him of greater importance than the other, for to show god to the people was no more important naturally than showing justice; and in fact, sometimes he wondering that they were not the same thing exactly, and if they could ever be.

When he accepted the messenger into his throne room, however, and heard the message (thought he was pleased by the sentiment initially), and saw the gifts, he was horrified, for the snake was one of the forms their god was most fond of taking, and, never having been near the ocean or having seen an eel before, he grew outraged at the way this distant king treated the three snakes, which were revered as sacred; a snake was never killed, for it was against the law, and every time a snake died in his kingdom, its body was burned so that it would not decay and potentially desecrate the image of the immortal god whose form was often snake-like. These small, shriveled bodies were, to him, sacrilege, which was almost as bad as murder, and it was all he could do not to slay the messenger in his rage; but he remembered that the messenger should not be blamed for the message or gifts of his master, and so restrained from harming the innocent one.

"Tell me," Melchizedek asked the messenger, "in your kingdom, would I be able to find many such gifts as these?"

"Oh, many, many more," the messenger assured him. "These are served at every feast of merit, and they are given often as rewards to worthy men of renown. Your majesty would have no trouble acquiring as many as he wished from our people, who are exceedingly wealthy and have such delights to spare."

Now Melchizedek was infuriated.

"Tell your master," he said in a controlled tone, "that I shall not honor his gift nor his offer of peace, but that we shall be bitter enemies, him and I

— for he has desecrated what is sacred, and his life and yours, therefore, are forfeit; nevertheless, I shall allow you to return, to give him fair warning that we shall find your kingdom and raze it to the ground, if not in my reign, then in my successor's. You cannot escape, since your sacrilege surpasses all that I have seen in my whole life put together. Leave! now, for I shall be of no mind to let you go shortly."

The messenger, afraid for his life, though not adequately, left immediately, bought some meager provisions with the little money he had, and returned to his kingdom as fast as his legs would allow themselves to carry him.

When he arrived at the castle of the king, he paced about outside for a time before he had the courage (or folly — he could not decide which, at any rate) to go inside and tell the king the news of his peace offering, how it had utterly failed, and how King Melchizedek was most likely amassing troops right now to come and wipe them out, which was frightening to the messenger, because their kingdom seemed to be much greater than his own.

Finally going inside, and to the throne room of the king, he prostrated himself before his majesty, laying the untouched gift of dried eels before him. He trembled in fear.

"Your majesty," he said, "your greatness, your wiseness, my king and lord... the meeting has gone very wrong."

"Oh?" the king acted interested. "What has happened?"

"Your highness," he groveled, "the great and foolish King Melchizedek has rejected your gifts and denied you any kind of treaty — instead, he threatens to wage war; and indeed, his armies appeared stronger than yours, and I am sorely afraid." Thus he poured out his heart to the king.

The king's face assumed the most worried look he could muster, although it was wasted, more or less, since the messenger's face was still pressed heavily against the floor. The king scratched his chin, and then

rubbed his temples, pondering deeply, or at least appearing to be doing so. Finally, he spoke to the knave:

"The failure was not your fault. You cannot be blamed for another king's rash actions: How could you? I assure you, I will not harm you. Yet, the damage has been done. Thank you, messenger, for the great service you have done our kingdom. Your obedience to your king will be rewarded."

He gave the messenger a bag of gold coins and sent him on his way, happy to have profited.

The king sent other messengers right away to his allies informing them that the King Melchizedek had declared war upon his kingdom unjustly, and that he was not powerful enough to defend against so great a kingdom as Melchizedek's; that he needed their help and assistance in this horrible time of impending doom upon his kingdom, and would they send aid as soon as possible, since it was possible that Melchizedek's armies would already be at his door by the time they received his message. His allies, concerned for their good friend and sure that he would contribute all he could to their own wealth once the difficulty had passed, sent troops and soldiers in abundance, determined to repel the armies of Melchizedek from their allied and comparatively small kingdoms.

The bird who had sung from outside the king's windows sang no more after the day the messenger returned, and flew away from the kingdom — no one knew where it had gone and no one, except for an old maid who worked in the king's room, mending his clothes and tending to him when he was sick. She had enjoyed the music coming from the throat of the bird every morning and evening, but when it was gone and sang no more, she was extremely disappointed, and sunk for a time into a deep melancholy, which she expressed only through longing looks out of the king's window and poorly mended shirts every now and then.

The war waged on in the bird's absence, and Melchizedek's forces were

strong and numerous, so the allies had to fight hard to repel them adequately. They fought for a year, the tide turning first to one side, then to the other. During this time, there was a man who lived in the kingdom, in the city that the king lived in. He was a blacksmith, and he had served the king faithfully since the beginning of his rule; he had served the king's father faithfully, and his father before him, as a young man. He had always furnished the king with the weapons and chariot axles that he needed, for the proper wages, and had always fashioned the king's royal staff himself, out of the finest metals he could find, always, overlaid with gold and inset with gems provided by the king from his own treasury. The work always provided the man with the greatest joy. To work with his hands and tools and create such a gift for the king was a privilege, he told himself, that he would not trade for the world. He had fashioned the king's father's personal chariot out of the strongest metal he could find, and had cheered him on as he rode it through the city streets in the time of peace that they had.

He could not deny, however, that the new king was cruel and heartless, making him work for little or no pay to create extra weapons and shields and axles for the war, which the king's own kingdom was, sadly, ill prepared for. He overworked the poor blacksmith to the point of exhaustion; the man worked late into the night in order to fill the orders that the king forced him by law to fill. He had lived in the same workshop for three generations, but now, as war pressed heavily on his kingdom and an unjust tyrant ruled the city, he, silently, in the middle of the night, packed up his things, closed the door behind him, and left through the city gates. No amount of persuasion could have convinced him to stay. He did not hate the king, for if he did, he would have killed him — no one could have held his hand back if this had been the case. But he did not, and so he left, leaving his billows in perfect working condition behind him, and all in place for the man willing to work under such a tyrannical rule as the new king held over the kingdom.

The blacksmith, whose name was Setiawan, journeyed for many days, for weeks, living off of the food he had packed for the journey, eating very little and feeling hunger pangs and faint fairly often. He drank from streams when he could find them, and crossed a river when he needed to. Finally, after a few weeks of purposeful travel, Setiawan found himself at the borders of the kingdom of the Priest and King, Melchizedek.

Setiawan entered the kingdom a sojourner in a strange land. He asked until he found the castle, at which he begged audience with the king. He said that he was a poor blacksmith from another kingdom who sought refuge in this kingdom, and assistance in settling in among the subjects of this new kingdom. He was allowed audience; he approached King Melchizedek with his few belongings slung over his back and said:

“Great Priest and King Melchizedek: I come from the kingdom across the desert, which has of late been under siege by you and your vast armies. I cannot stay there — the king ruling over us is an unjust one, and I would beg that you take me into your kingdom as a humble blacksmith, although in the other kingdom I smithed for the king himself.”

The Priest and King Melchizedek was pleased with Setiawan’s account, and he replied:

“O blacksmith, you shall have all that you desire.”

By which was taken to mean that Melchizedek was pleased with the blacksmith’s leaving his enemy to join his own kingdom.

Setiawan, naturally, only desired a smith shop for him to live and work in, and the King Melchizedek gave it to him, and Setiawan went to work making the best smithing work that anyone had ever made before in that kingdom. The King Melchizedek ordered many swords from Setiawan, who was more than happy to oblige, because he was being rewarded here for his hard work by a just ruler. Each sword he constructed was painstakingly folded and beaten to sharpness, each hilt was molded to perfectly fit a man’s hand.

They were of the best quality, and nearly every soldier that was given one gave it a name: names like Slashbinger and Firespewer, Dragonslayer, Thrimsocker and Bellbanger, names of all sorts and all sizes for the soldiers of every size and shape. The most famous of the swords was called Rachenstein, and was wielded by a young man who had trained from a young age in physical activities, and was, therefore, fairly strong and very perseverant. He would not back down, his superior commanders reported, when faced by any number of foes, and would always be the last to leave the field of battle, sometimes needing to be dragged. Against twenty he would not back down; against fifty he swung all the harder, never minding their number or determination, but only his own, and their own juxtaposition to his sword. He fought bravely, there was no doubt, and was awarded medals abundantly for his great service to his kingdom. Melchizedek himself said that he had “never seen a boy fight with so much might and main as this one.” It was chiefly due to him and Rachenstein that Priest Melchizedek’s kingdom won the war, and so his sword was given a prominent display stand in the king’s palace, so that visitors could see the sword that won the war. A little poem was carved on the stand just below the sword that read as follows:

The good fight is but an extension of a brave man.
The good sword, being the extension of that man,
Is but an extension of the blacksmith,
Who is but an extension of the good populace,
Which tells, then, that a good fight is but an extension of a good people.

Setiawan's old kingdom, meanwhile, had been razed to the ground. The allies it once had were now completely run dry on resources, since the king’s kingdom had not been able to contribute anything at all to the war, and so they left him to his own misery, a kingdom desolate and in fear and hatred of

its ruler. The king paced to and fro all the day long — then he worried and fretted on his throne — then he took to bed with a sickness. He had a single son, a boy given to him by his wife whom he hardly paid any attention to at all. He regretted leaving such a terrible kingdom to his son to rule, especially since he was just a boy, but he had no choice — he was dying and he could do nothing about it.

He grew more and more sickly, and his nurse, though she tended him, could not make him better. She feared she would lose him who she had given her life's work to care for, since he was a small child. His condition worsened: doctors could do nothing for him, sorcerer's could do nothing for him. His sickness spread, and nobody, it seemed, could stop it.

One day, while he was looking at the wall of his bedroom with a blank mind and a fragile constitution, he heard, on the windowsill, the sound of the bird singing. The kingdom was in ruins, the people and economy deep in depression, yet the bird had returned to sing. The king could not believe his ears — his eyes opened and sparked, like the lighting of a fire; his head turned to gaze at the small, fragile figure in the window, the bird whom he had always disregarded, but now held in higher esteem than any man he knew on the earth; his hands reached out to it, as if to welcome it into his room, but the bird stayed outside, continuing to send its music inward, to the king's ears. The king leaned back onto his pillow and breathed a happy sigh of relief. He was healed.

He passed away that night in his sleep.

He was buried the following day, and a kingdom-wide day of mourning was observed. The bird never sang in his kingdom again.

The old nurse was heartbroken that her master had died, although she had heard the bird outside the king's window the night he died and knew it to be a good omen. The king's son took over ruling, and was just and kind and helped the citizens to reconstruct their lives, and made true friends with

everyone he could (Melchizedek forgave the son for what he had condemned the father for) and in general lived a good rule, though not a prosperous one. He, however, neither needed nor wanted the old nurse to care for him: his mother, who had seen all the mistakes of his father, advised as to matters of the state and sewed his clothes and fed and dressed him. So the old nurse, whose name was Gala, left the castle where she had been employed her whole life, and went into the country, where she found a nice family to live with who tended sheep. There she spun wool for her living, and her fingers made the softest, most beautiful wool the family had ever felt. The daughter of the family learned how to spin from Gala, who was a natural at the craft, and she helped the old woman spin many days, so that the work was lighter and the time pleasanter. Gala was very much appreciative of the company, and the two of them talked often, and were very good friends.

However, one night, as old women are wont to do, Gala passed away in her sleep, and the girl was left as the only one in the household who could spin such wonderful thread out of such common wool as her father and brothers produced. She spun wool, some said, “as the sorcerer’s stone spun lead into gold,” and people came from far and wide to purchase the cloth woven from the threads spun by this girl. The price was soon driven up to ridiculous heights, and her family eventually became very wealthy. Her father drove her as he drove his herds on to greener grass, with crook and loud shouts, making her work long hours to provide more money for himself and his family. He doted upon her with gifts as one would dote upon a prize horse, but felt no real regard for her. Still, she was happy to spin her wool, for she enjoyed it — she only wished her father would appreciate her for who she was, not what she could do with a spinning wheel and the day’s sheared wool. She spun and spun and spun and never received her father’s kindness, though she received many presents and things and little trinkets that he had traded from passing goldsmiths or woodcarvers. These she kept in a chest in

her room, all except for a little carving of a bird that struck her fancy, which she wore on a string around her neck, for it was no bigger than a small turnip — indeed, seven such birds could have fit into the palm of her hand without falling off.

Soon, a drought plagued the land, and the family's sheep began dying off from lack of green grass to graze on. The girl's father set to killing off the ones that seemed to be dying anyway, since they needed food to eat, and selling off whatever they did not eat, so that his pile of money continued to grow, though his resources for earning that money were slowly and assuredly dwindling. Before long, there were no more sheep left at all, and the father was left with nothing.

There was no food in all the land, and so he was left with the fortune he had amassed from the cloth that had been woven from the thread that had been spun by his daughter with the technique she had learned from Gala, the old woman who had nursed the king who had been sung to by the bird who was the friend of the boy who had seen the god who had been saved by the fish who loved the whale.

The girl, who was very worried about her family's survival, went out from her home further into the countryside, looking for food (or something else for them to eat) or someone to help them in their distress, for her father had said that finding food and help was impossible, and she had never been one who believed in the chances of finding a true impossibility.

She found a small cave in the side of a hill several miles from their house, and she went inside to explore it. It was small, but big enough for her to stand up in; a small tunnel led back from the main cave further into the hill, but she could not go back into it without kneeling down and crawling on her hands and knees into the hill. Before she could, however, she heard a noise come from the tunnel, and stepped back. A small, mouse-like, troll-like woman came waddling out of the tunnel and into the main cave. She squinted

up at the girl and tipped her head back.

" 'oo ar yoo?" she asked the girl. "Wats yer name?"

"Ingrid," she said, for that was her name.

" Ah lahk thet nemm," the old lady said. "I dunno whatcher doin' hare, Noobahdy hazbin here sin sda shiep showed up inda feeld. I wonda watchood want wit dis my cave here."

"Well," Ingrid said, "my family has no way of getting food, and there is no food in all the land, because there is a drought, which has killed off all of our sheep."

"Ah, Igetit," the little lady, "The shiepies come an' nowun comes up'ear, but the shiepies go an' peepl come up heer aghen. Tdats a grate s'torih, dat won is. Dee shiepies go and dee peepil come back ub tooda cave. Aeh likeedat sdoree."

"It's a pretty story," said Ingrid, who could understand everything that the lady had said, "and it's true? That's very fascinating. How have you survived here in this cave for this long?"

"I DON'D TNO!!!!!!! WHAAAAAA!!!!!! 'OO AR YOO!!!!!!!!"

The girl was stunned.

"Wha, ah dinno whadahm ta' kinabut. Ah doo datdsum tahmz. Watcha tackin' bowt'now? Whadda we sayin'...?" She sat down in the corner of the cave and started picking at the end of a piece of a stick.

"I'm sorry," Ingrid said. "I just wanted to know how come you have been able to live here without any food. Are you hungry at all?"

"Hangray? no, I dun'dbee haungree, no. I eeda. I eeda lahdda thing'ess. Thing'ess induhyuh cave hee'a. Ah lahkee da tings hee'a-er inda kive. Da kave. Ah yoo hahngree, Inngg'reeed?"

"I am very hungry, yes. My family and I need help getting food. Can you help us?"

"Ah sure, o shhuure ah, yoo, betchya yoo bethcya ah ken. Comma

widda me hee'a. Donn hee'a-er."

The little lady layed on her stomach on the floor of the cave and crawled through the tunnel farther into the hill, even though she could have walked through it, as she did when she came out of it. Ingrid layed down and brought her stomach to the floor of the cave, crawling forward into the hole. She could hardly see the little lady's feet in front of her face, and once bumped her face into them. The woman crawled faster, though, and soon the two of them were in the middle of a cave that was pitch black all but for a small, very, extremely faint light coming from the tunnel and spilling out more or less no higher than the floor of the cavern. Ingrid could see their shoes, but nothing more, truly. Suddenly, a circular light appeared on the floor, brighter than the light had been outside (it was a cloudy day). The lady appeared visible in this light now, and descended into the hole from which the light was emanating.

"Cummun dowwn too thuh ... thuh how'ss. Thuh how'ss. Dowen unda."

Ingrid followed the little woman down the hole into the lighted room below, which was bright light a sunny day at noon, but with no yellow color — the room was lighted with a light that was both purely white and mysteriously blueish. Ingrid looked around her. The room was filled with treasures of all kinds. Golden goblets and dishes and crowns and coins and beautiful sculptures, rubies and diamonds and gems, the stuff that thriving kings' palaces are made out of. The stuff was all heaped up into piles, and the light seemed to come from the walls, or from the ceiling, or from the floor, or all three, or maybe it came from nowhere or everywhere. It was that sort of light, if you have ever had the opportunity and privilege to see one like it. There were beautiful things all around, far more beautiful than those trinkets her father had been buying her for the past few years. She didn't know where to start looking, but the little mouse-like troll-like woman, who only came up to her knee, beckoned her on.

After she recovered from her initial shock, Ingrid was confused. She wondered: How does one live on golden statues and brilliant jewels such as these? Surely there must be some sort of sustenance down here. But there was surely a limited amount, and it could not feed her whole family forever, whatever it was. Still, she followed the little lady to see where she took her.

The cave had walls, and the little lady led Ingrid through a hole in one of them into a small room, just big enough for her to stand up without hitting her head on the ceiling. At the end of the tunnel, there was a wall, and in front of the wall there was a pedestal, and on the wall there was a little shelf about at the height of the short woman's eyes. The woman stood on the pedestal, and stood still and firm, and not on her tiptoes, expectantly, but on her whole foot, and both of them. Ingrid watched, and then she heard a sound, coming from inside the wall. As she watched, a small hole opened up in the wall just above the shelf, and a small ball that looked like it was wrapped in a stretchy white cloth dropped down onto the shelf. The hole closed up. The woman took the ball off the shelf and bit into it. The inside of the ball looked like cheese, but the color was like the sheeps' skin after her father and brothers had sheared them. The woman continued biting into it, chewing swallowing. She stepped away from the pedestal, motioning for Ingrid to take her turn on it.

"Go'ahn m'liddl'n yoo. Yoo'm taykin thuh yore food doo'm. Likah dee tsshawre't liddl ol' mee'm."

Ingrid stepped up onto the pedestal, ducking a little tiny bit. She stood still, flat on both feet, until she heard the same noise, and the same hole opened and out of it came a yellow-whitish ball identical to the one the lady had received, only rather bigger.

"Eedit," the lady said to Ingrid. "Idz piridy good. Too eed't."

Ingrid tentatively bit into the ball. The skin was like that of an orange, only not so bitter. The inside tasted like unsalted curds at first, but, when

she had been chewing it, it became much more like her mother's freshly baked bread, and the next bite was like her bean stew. The final bite tasted kind of like apple pie, which was beautiful and tasty. And before she knew it, she was full, and she was satisfied. Her first thought was to get another ball of the miraculous food to give to her family, so she stepped up onto the pedestal again; but there was no sound, and no food came out. The short woman laughed a little in the back of her throat and said:

"Heeeee..... yeeoooooo can'ut ged morden wun, jus'd oowun a day. Budiddl' fill ya'up. Fillya an' keep ya'up idl'. Idl' doo t'dat, idl'."

"So my family will have to come live here, then, because then they will be fed?"

"Oooooohh, ahhhll d'peepl'... ahh — d'no, d'no abbut'dat, d', ald'peepl'... in d'... mmhhhmmm..... well, iffdey ken fit'down heera. T'droo duht'dunnel. Uppin t'duh light. T'duh light. Ifnt'dey ken maykit down heer."

Ingrid was ecstatic, and thanked the little woman over and over, hugging and hugging her, awkwardly for the short one, who couldn't touch the ground when Ingrid picked her up.

"Yeeooo beringg'duh... yoor fahmily. Dat'd bee goood. Dat'd bee guuhd."

Ingrid went back to her family and her home, and they had been wondering where she had gone, and she told them all about the troll in the cave and the food that could be found, leaving out the bit about the treasure, since she hardly thought it mattered, and was completely content with her little wooden bird carving. Her father was proud and would not come, because he wanted to stay on the farm and work for his food, and he convinced Ingrid's oldest brother to stay in their house with him. Her mother, younger sister, and other brothers, however, came with her, despite her father's scoffing and veiled pleading and arguments for not leaving their home to go live in some cave that Ingrid had found. They walked for the several miles out to the cave in the hill, and when they got there it was late

in the day.

They crouched in the outer cave, and Ingrid looked around for the tunnel to the interior room: she found it, and one by one they crawled on their stomachs into the tiny interior room. Squished, Ingrid called a few times for the mouse-like, troll-like woman, whose name she realized she did not know, but she did not answer; so Ingrid searched the floor with her fingers for the cover of the hole into the depths of the earth, into the secret room. But she could not find it. She searched the entire floor, but could find nothing. Her mother and brothers began to complain, her sister began to whimper, and everyone wondered aloud to each other why they had come there in the first place. Ingrid did not want to say it, but she was beginning to become less sure that she had ever found the treasure room to begin with, let alone that it was possible to find it again. But she did not give up hope. She could not give up hope.

She felt the stone beneath her knee push against her a few times. She scrambled back, towards the wall, away from where she had been kneeling, and the little woman came up out of the hole, shedding the light all over the interior chamber. Ingrid's family was amazed; some scooted back to get away from the eerie, supernatural light, and the strange, inhuman woman, who was short and very much like an old troll, only very much younger and more active, one could tell from her silhouette.

Ingrid cried out for joy and scooted after the lady (since scooting was really all anyone of normal, human height could do in that small of a space), calling out thank you and that she had returned and all sorts of exclamations of happiness and joy. The woman simply opened the door to the underground cavern and went back down, getting out of the way, as it were. Ingrid descended after her, calling out to her family:

"Follow me! Oh, follow me! Here it is, here it is, this is... oohh, here is the cave! Come down!"

Her family followed her down with much interest and curiosity, and, lo and behold, when they were all under the floor of the cave and the little lady had closed the hole back up, they all looked around and were astonished, first at the light, and secondly, at the vast amounts of treasure and gold and such that lay in the cavern.

"Why did you not tell us about all of this?" they inquired incredulously.

"I had forgotten," was her reply. Two of her brothers could not believe her, and called her exceedingly foolish and stupid for forgetting such a treasure as this, saying that she had no mind for the family fortune or future and that she should have told them about it from the start, or else she was very, very pea-brained and wooden-headed, and had not a lick of sense in her whole body; but her mother, sister, and other brother knew that, in order for her to have truly forgotten such a great treasure as this, like she said she did, there would have had to be an ever greater treasure in store that they knew nothing about yet.

The two brothers that upbraided her for leaving out the story about the treasure went back to their father to tell him immediately, so that he could come too and lift some or another of the gold pieces out of the cavern, so that their family fortune should not be so depleted as it was now, and they could buy back all the sheep they lost and start again as a well-to-do family. They made extra care to mark the cave and trace every step they made back to their family's house (since caves such as that often get lost in the stories, and they may never have found their way back), and, once they had gone home and told their father of all the many wonders they had seen inside that cave (and there had been many) and he was convinced (which took hardly even the time it does for me to type this sentence), they all returned to the cave, which was as they found it, and proceeded to climb through the tunnel and into the interior room. The oldest of the two brothers who had been there before went first. But he had only gotten his head inside the

passage when his shoulders were stuck, and, no matter which way he turned himself, he found that he could not get back into the passage. It was, in fact, far too small for him to crawl through at all, although earlier that day he had crawled through it just perfectly on his way both in and out. The other brother who had been there tried to go through (he was smaller), and he, too, failed. Then the eldest brother and their father also came to try their hand at fitting themselves into the passage, all trying desperately and scraping themselves so as to fit into the tiny tunnel, but it was all to no avail — no amount of squeezing or squishing or forcing could allow them back into that cave which they had just recently been inside. They could not believe their ill fortune. The father and the two brothers who had been there before immediately ran back to the house to fetch chisels and spoons and other things to chip away at the side of the tunnel; but the rock would not chisel, though they worked at it for weeks (which they did, eventually), and no piece would be scraped off at all, in fact, with any tool or weapon they used. They were trapped outside.

Meanwhile, inside the cavern, Ingrid and her mother, brother, and sister were still looking around and marveling at the many wonders. Ingrid went to thank the little mouse-like, troll-like woman:

"I'm sorry," she said, "I don't think I have ever learned your name."

"Raharja," the woman said perfectly. "My name iz Raharja."

"Thank you so much, Raharja. I could never repay you for all the help you've given me and my family," Ingrid said.

"Ohh, noh t'hanks reki-needed. Ah done'dave nuttin dat'diz mahn down 'eera. Ah dust habda 'tings ahdab 'in gibbun. Enden ah gibbun uhdem t'doo eeyoo. It'dss no p'robbablem. I dunt'done duhs'duff ehneewway. Id'its all yohrz t'doo. All yohrz t'doo."

Having said this, Raharja started going for the place with the pedestal, and beckoning after Ingrid to call her family and follow her, so Ingrid

beckoned to her family and followed Raharja. Each of her family members got a ball of food — the ones that had remained in the cave did, at any rate — and all ate them, and were full and satisfied. They thanked Raharja, who repeated in her peculiar dialect that she owned nothing anyway, and it was all just as much theirs as hers, and afterwards set about exploring the cave. They decided that they should not go back until the famine was over, and would send someone outside to check once a week or so, and ask someone. But if they went home, Ingrid's mother was afraid that her father would be very angry and not welcome them graciously, she told her, as he should. So they stayed in the cave. They found many fun and entertaining things to do, mostly tell stories to each other or play games, nearly all of which involved toys made out of the various golden things in the cavern. For the whole world would not be able to make use of everything that was in that cavern, they reasoned, and therefore it would be a tiny loss to use a few golden things as playthings for themselves. Besides, they said, they were extracting more joy out of the beautiful items (which were really fantastic as bowling balls or marbles, if the right spherical shape was used) than most monarchs would extract out of twenty times the treasure that they now had at their fingertips. They made swing sets out of mail links and bronze shields. They made mazes out of statues and piles of stuff and tried to make their way through them without climbing over the walls they had created. They delighted in the simplest of things, paying no attention whatsoever to the price that their plaything would fetch in the marketplace, but only how much fun they could have with it here and now. The light continued illuminating the cave in an almost eerie, friendly sort of manner, like a miracle you can't explain, but accept as good and pure nonetheless. They checked every week with a different person in the neighborhood, disguising themselves and inquiring as a stranger to the land whether or not there was food to be had here. If who they asked said there was none, and that drought still ravaged

the land, they went back into their cavern and stayed for another week. For months they lived like this, eating only what they needed to, and caring for each other, and playing with each other, and living very happily under the earth, beneath the surface, in the company of a little mouse-troll woman named Raharja.

Meanwhile, above the ground, the father and three of his sons were starving. They resorted to eating bark first, and then grass, and then they began nibbling at pieces of the house. There was no food for them anywhere, and the eldest one day remembered his family. They had not returned searching for food, so either they had perished in the black of the cave, or they had found food and sustenance there and were still living. In the case of the latter, survival and a stop to the pangs of hunger that gnawed at his bones was his; and in the case of the former, he would die, but in the dark and quiet, away from the quarreling, squabblesome brothers and father that he was living with now. Getting up his courage, then, in the middle of the night, when all of them were passed out more or less on the floor, conserving energy as best they could, he got out of bed, out of the house that he had called home, and walked in the dark (the stars provided a meager sort of light) down to the cave. He crawled inside, then to the tunnel — he went right in, even though he had tried numerous times before, and his father and brothers alike, and had gotten no farther in than his shoulders allowed, and sometimes not even that far. He pulled himself along on his stomach, and rose to a sort of kneeling stance once he was inside completely. He began to feel around for the passage that she had told them about, the cover to a hole that led to a lit cave in which, presumably, they were at this moment surviving. The possibility of it became less clear to him every second; nevertheless, he continued to grope about in the dark, bashing fingers and shins and knees and things on the stony walls and floor and, once or twice, the ceiling as well. His eyes were darkened, and, it being dark outside, he

could see absolutely nothing, not even the difference between a closed eye and an open one. Finally, giving up and in desperation, he threw himself on the floor and beat it with all his might, looking for hollow sounds with his closed fists. He began crying. He wanted to go home.

Suddenly, he felt the floor push against his stomach a few times, quickly, like somebody knocking on a door. He rolled to the side, lying exhausted on his back, and up popped a little panel in the center of the cave room. Light, beautiful light filled the entire cave, and he could see; all the places that he had bashed against, all the hard, rough difficulties, he could see now, for what they truly were and not for the pain of the wounds he had incurred by them. Light streamed out of the hole — and up out of the hole popped Raharja, the most welcome, beautiful sight he had ever seen, made all the more beautiful because it was, to him and his father and brothers, utterly, absolutely, inexplicably and irrevocably impossible.

She led him down into the cave, where he met Ingrid and the rest of his family, who were all very much alive, and they helped him to the pedestal and bid him stand on it; and he did, and out came an off-white, yellowish ball; and they told him to eat it, and he did, and he said it was the most delicious mutton he had ever tasted. And the whole thing was gone within a few minutes.

He grew very much assimilated into their life in the cave, and he told them all about the different ways their father and brothers had tried to get into the cave to get the gold, but how they couldn't, and how they could do nothing to penetrate either the rock around the tunnel and cave itself or the ground where they estimated the underground cavern was (for they had tried digging to it, but they hit the hardest bed of rock they had ever encountered before, and nothing could penetrate it either). They were very sad, and grieved a little, but then went back to their ways, since their father and brothers would not want the food they had to offer if they could get in,

but only the gold, which was, Ingrid and the others in the cave knew, no use to them.

The father and brothers never repented of their desire for the gold, and were constantly seeking after it; seeking after gold and food, as if they were one and the same thing. They went crazy, each of them in their own time and way, not wanting food but wanting food, loving the gold but hating it, until eventually they starved to death. Each of them collapsed somewhere outside, grasping at dirt as food, and nearby dogs, starved and eager to eat anything, licked their bones clean of flesh, and broke many of their bones. The drought continued around them, although Raharja kept telling the cave-dwellers that it wouldn't be long before it was over.

"T'dat drowd'tasndtid gounuh keppup berree mmucha lon'garuhmmm. Nope. Not'damuch lonn'garuh. Mmmm."

And she was right. Within a few months, the drought had ended. People began to grow things again, the population began to go on the rise. They had been living in the cave for three years and a third, and when they came out, they were not blinded by the sun in the least, since the light in the cave had been substantial enough to keep their eyes from growing perpetually dim, as happens with other cave dwellers after long periods of hiding. They said a quick good-bye to Raharja, whom they had grown to love, with all her quirks and abnormalities (her size and figure being the least of them) and went back to their old home to see what had become of it. They found that their father and brothers were not there, although they did not know what had become of them, since they could not find their bodies anywhere. They set to work growing things to eat in a sort of personal garden in the well watered field, which began to grow grass soon. They were very happy.

One day, about a week after they had returned to their old house, Ingrid went back to the cave to invite Raharja to live with them, and to thank her once more for the saving help she had been to them. She brought with a

basket of thinned vegetables, so that the woman could try some food other than the white ball that they had lived off of. Ingrid went back to the same hill the cave had always been in, and looked for the opening, but it was gone. There was no cave anymore. She was terribly perplexed — the holes where her father and brothers had tried to dig to the cavern below were there, and all the familiar landmarks were there (she had come out and in many, many times, to check and see if the drought had stopped yet and they could come out) — everything was in place, but, alas, there was no cave opening. She spent the good part of the afternoon looking for it, more perplexed than frustrated, and more grieved than perplexed, but she could find nothing of the entrance to the home they had known for so long. Finally, wondering, she turned back to her own home.

Ingrid and her family lived there for many years. They eventually purchased a few sheep, so that Ingrid could continue to spin, which she loved to do, and they were all happy. When her youngest brother had grown up, he, realizing that the estate would be left to his eldest brother and that, if he stayed, he would be his whole life under the rule of his brother, set out with a few meals and some belongings in a bag on his back to make his way in the world. He kissed his mother and sisters goodbye, and shook his brother's hand and bid him good luck, and then set off walking towards the nearest town, to see what he could find there for himself.

Upon arriving, he first inquired as to a room, and where he could stay, and how he could pay for it — the first innkeeper he talked to said that he could stay if he would clean all the dishes and tables for all the other guests — the second innkeeper he talked to said that he could stay if he brushed down all the horses and fed them and watered them and shoveled out their stalls (he knew nothing about horses) — and the third innkeeper he talked to, with the smallest and most rundown inn, said that he could stay in a room so long as he told his daughters stories every night, for surely, the innkeeper

said, he had lived a tale-filled life wherever he came from, and he could come up with a good, solid tale a night for his children? The youngest brother, whose name was Maverick, decided that this was by far the best offer of the three, for all he would have to do for his room and board was tell tales such as they came up with as children in the cave, and wouldn't that be the easiest thing in the world for him? So he accepted the offer, and began to stay in the inn, telling stories to the innkeeper's child daughters for his room and board.

The first month or so went easily. He had told hundreds of stories in the years in the cave, so the first thirty came easily. The next thirty as well, and the next thirty after that. People began to gather from around town to hear his stories, he was such an amazing storyteller, and the innkeeper, sensing some money in the business, began to sell drinks and food at the storytelling nights, milking profit out of hot chocolate and muffins and other sweet things that people enjoy eating and drinking when they are listening to stories — also milk and beer, and bread and butter and cheese and fruits, when they were in season, which was not often. The innkeeper began giving Maverick a small percentage of the profits, so that he could go out and buy himself nice things from the market, and he always gave his daughters front row seats at the story time.

After several months, Maverick began to run out of stories. He started to reuse stories that he had used months ago, when he first started their job, and he told them so well that nobody remembered that they were the same stories only over again and told a little differently. The daughters were the first to suspect it, but even then, by the time they came around to the old stories again, they were so eager to hear them and had nearly forgotten them, like when you forget a story just up until the moment right before it happens, and then you are still thrilled nonetheless to hear it unfold in front of you. And so Maverick went on like this in the town for many years,

very happily retelling stories, and every once in a while coming up with a new one, and very often improving upon old ones. He became a staple of the town, an attraction of sorts, a thing to do on a given night out of the week. He was locally quite popular, and grew somewhat old prattling away in this manner, telling fascinating stories to any audience that would sit still, for his room, board, and luxuries of life.

As the third generation from him grew in, however, the children began to scoff at his storytelling, saying how all his stories were the same, even the ones their grandparents and he himself had said were different, and how they wanted stories about more than little girls lost in an underground cave and sheep who get eaten by wolves while an incompetent shepherd looks on. They wanted other, more modern stories, and Maverick did not know how to tell them, so the people slowly lost interest in him and shunned him from their groups of well-known, well-respected individuals. The innkeeper's son, who was now running the inn, since his father was old and sickly, did not care to have around an old man who would no longer draw customers — yet he dare not get rid of him while his father was still alive. Maverick stayed, then, in the inn, living as he normally did. Less and less people came to hear his stories, and the daughters were now all grown up, and few people came. Usually there was at least one person, and Maverick would excitedly tell the tale of some hapless sailor who worked a merchant's ship but wanted to be a pirate, and never got the chance, or of a lonely king with not a friend in the world who befriended a poor peasant girl and married her. Sometimes, nobody came, and poor, old Maverick spent his evening in solitude, more or less — the innkeeper's son was usually there, running around tidying up the place or serving a few drunken customers who had no interest in stories for children.

One night, a little girl came all alone who Maverick had never seen before. Very excited to hear a story from the old man, she sat down and

pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them and gazed at him with wonderment and expectation. Maverick, very excited to have so loving an audience, the like of which he had not had for several years now, conjured up a beautiful story about a breathtakingly beautiful princess in a far off land, who was being forced to marry an ugly, old, nasty, rude, gaseous suitor who wouldn't have been fit to work in the kitchen of a better king, although she loved a handsome, kind peasant boy, and she loved him. And the two of them wished to get married, against her father's wishes, and so, after much trouble, she ran away from the castle with the peasant boy, to a far off kingdom, dressed in plain clothing, so that she was able to live in peace and happiness. Her family looked for her when they awoke in the morning and found that she was gone, and they sent search parties out throughout the entire kingdom, but she was never found, and the ugly, rude suitor was left without a wife.

After the story was done, the little girl, wide eyed and fully entertained, clapped her hands and hugged him around the ankles and thanked him for such a wonderful story, although the thing had been really quite plain. When he had nodded his head and acknowledged her appreciation, and thanked her for coming to listen, she stood up and began to walk away, but stopped and turned back and asked:

"Is it true?"

"What?" he asked.

"Is the story true? Did it actually happen? Is the princess happily married to the peasant boy now?"

Maverick was shocked, not by the girl, or by the fact that she would ask such a question, or anything of that sort, but by the question itself. The surprise stemmed from the fact that no one had asked him a question like that before, and he had never asked himself. He mumbled something assuring to the little girl, such as, "Yes, of course, they're living happily now," and

bade her go on her way and come back another night, but when she had left, he sat down hard in a nearby chair and pondered what she had meant by it. He had never wondered whether or not the stories he told were “true” — they existed in his head, he knew that, and then he spoke and they came out in words which people understood. In those senses they were true. But had the things in them actually ever happened? Somewhere, some day long passed, (“Or not so long,” he said to himself), was there some princess that matched the description of the one in his story? Perhaps she didn’t have blue eyes that sparkled like the summer sky, or skin fair as fresh grain in the fields, as he had said to the little girl, but if not, what did she look like? Perhaps that was not the true part of the story. But then what part was true, if not that? Perhaps the part about the princess loving a peasant boy — perhaps that part was true. Perhaps, somewhere in the vast, nearly limitless world, some princess somewhere had loved or will love (“Or is loving,” he told himself) a peasant boy, although she was being forced to marry an uglier, cruder, lesser man because he was rich and well-to-do. Perhaps that was the most true part of the story. “Yes,” he said to himself, “that was most likely.” But what did that say about the princess? Did it say the same thing about all women? All girls? All females, perhaps? No, it wasn’t the last one — “Ewes can’t love,” he said.

He was terribly disconcerted by this phenomenon, this line of inquiry, and as a result felt less and less like telling stories every day. The girl never came back to listen to his stories, and the innkeeper’s son, after a week of this, learned that his father had finally passed away, and posthaste, taking advantage of his father’s absence, sent Maverick away, old though he was, since he no longer procured any profit for him. Maverick went up into the hills, alone, to think, since the people around him made far too much noise to make thinking possible, especially about such matters as were plaguing his mind. What had he been doing his whole life? Was it a waste to tell stories

about things that never happened and people and places that never existed and morals that weren't true? Had he ever told a story with a false moral? Could morals be false? What was a moral? Who made them, if not the storyteller (which he doubted to be the case — he could not remember ever feeling as though he had created a moral), and where does the maker of morals keep them? How do we get at them? Are they worth getting at?

Deeper and deeper into melancholy thought he continued to spiral, treading deeper and deeper into philosophic depression that often overcomes those who dabble too much in the images of true things, and take them to be truth itself. He found a cave up among the hills — a very spacious cave — and, feeling very at home in it almost immediately, called it his new permanent dwelling, and set down soft boughs and things to sleep on and under. He found berries and nuts and roots to eat, and went down into the village every so often to beg for a piece of bread, or to mooch meals off of people who were very kindly to him, mostly out of pity, and who could not understand how the innkeeper's son could be heartless as to throw him out of his house without so much as a parting gift. He spent much of his time in the cave, brooding and thinking about how true his stories were, now that he had told them for so many years, and whether or not he ought to stop or keep going, and why he should do so in either case. He had always assumed his stories to be worthy of being listened to, but if something was false, surely it must be unworthy of being listened to, mustn't it? How could it not be, if it were false — yet many good stories were fine and good to listen to, and taught children good things, and how to do them, and how to distinguish them from bad or at least worser things. Were these tales only good for children then, and for adults, useless or, at worst, detrimental? He wondered and paced and mourned and pouted and sulked, more confused than depressed, and ventured out of the cave only on cloudy days, or days when he felt particularly bottled up and needed to get out, as he felt sometimes

now that he was old.

One day as he was out walking, on a particularly partially cloudy day, he was looked up into the sky, trying to imagine what each of the clouds looked like. There was one which he first thought was a turtle, but with flat legs like a chicken's wing, and then a snake or eel-like thing, but then was neither, since a bird flew in front of it and, it seemed to Maverick, scattered it into the air around it, so that the cloud was no more. The bird landed on his shoulder — he tried not to move so as not to scare it off or provoke it — its claws were sharp, and he did not wish to end up dead alone in the hills being eaten by a giant bird of prey. The bird sat still on his shoulder, then flew to and landed on a nearby branch. It turned and looked at Maverick, then flew away, over the next hill, and was gone from Maverick's sight.

The next day, Maverick, who had lived thus far in the mountain eating nothing more than nuts and berries and roots, found at the doorstep of his cave, just outside, a dead rabbit, freshly killed. A few yards off stood the bird of prey, kind of like a hawk, but not — its feathers were all white, except for some near the tail that were greyish. The bird flew away again, looking at him with his head cocked to one side before it flew off. Under where its feet had been was a pile of dry wood.

Maverick spent the morning making a fire and cooking the rabbit over it. He had a hearty meal out of the rabbit, and ate it heartily, with heart, and his heart was filled, and he felt whole again, like a person and not just an imitation of one, an imitator and liar who tells stories. He walked about that day outside, in the open air, breathing and sighing (a little) and being happy again, although he didn't really know why — it wasn't a particularly good rabbit, or meal even, for that matter. But it, for some reason, had corresponded with a good day. A good outside day, out of the cave. When he came back to the cave, another rabbit was waiting on the pile of burnt wood, freshly killed, again. He cooked this one too, and was outside cooking and

eating and singing (a little) until the stars came out, and then he looked up at them. It was impossible to count them all, he thought to himself, and then he tried, or started to try, but he gave up after a few minutes. Impossible, he said to himself. He tried to look for shapes in the stars, like he had been told about when he was a kid, but he couldn't find any, except the spoon, or shovel, or whatever it was. He gazed at the sky for a time, then went back into his cave to go to sleep. He slept inside that night.

The next morning, he found another rabbit at his doorstep, with more wood, and the bird waiting there for him, next to the opening of the cave. He came outside tentatively, passing the bird as though it were a guard protecting the rabbit and wood, sidestepping around it, ready to flee at any moment. The bird didn't move, really, so after not too much time he took the rabbit and wood and began building a fire while the bird watched him. He built the fire and cooked the rabbit and ate it while sitting on the rocks in a clearing about five yards from his cave home door, all the while with the bird looking on, at him, staring nonchalantly, merely observing, yet looking for attention, maybe, it seemed. When he was done, he turned and looked and it was still there, and he got up and walked away, walking through the hills, to the top of one with a grassy crest that overlooked the village, and he looked, and could imagine that he saw his old house, although he didn't rightly know which was to look. He looked out in the direction he thought it might be, and imagined he saw the hill under which they had lived for three years. Three years. That was such a small amount of time now that he had lived his whole life — yet it was three years underground. And now he slept underground, like in his childhood, like with Raharja and Ingrid and his mother and sister and eldest brother. He looked out over the open space (though, in truth, he couldn't see far now, being old and the hill being not that high), and then he stood up and walked back to his cave. In the clearing again was a rabbit, and he ate it for supper. There was no bird this time. This night, he slept outside,

underneath the stars.

When he awoke, a small goat was killed fresh and ready, and the bird was standing on it, looking very friendly, with his head cocked to one side again, as he had done before. The goat looked, although it was small, all to big for the bird to carry on its own, but Maverick paid no real attention to this — in his stories anything could happen, why not in reality? He cooked the whole goat and ate half, then cooked the other half a little more, until it was well done, and left it out in the sun to dry. Then Maverick looked at the bird, in its eyes. It looked at him, then flew up quickly (he fell back with nearly as much speed, with his arms up and his wits amiss) and, flapping its wings a few times, landed on his shoulder again. Maverick made no objection, either with his hands or his voice, and he stood still for a minute, using his legs, thinking about holding up the bird, although it was the lightest thing in the world, in reality — he merely believed that it was heavy, thus the sight of it confused him so. He began walking soon, thinking that he was stronger than he had ever been before, since he believed himself to be carrying the bird and his frail body, when, in fact, he was carrying only himself, and it would have been worlds more correct to say that the bird was, in fact, and in a strange way, carrying him.

He walked up to the crest of the hill again, and this time, he neither was able to nor imagined that he saw his home, or the cave from his youth; nor did he see the inn, but he saw, in the distance, a desert of sorts, or a wasteland. And in the wasteland was an oasis, with trees, and a pool, a large pool. And, from the distance that he was at, he could see, or imagine he saw, large, grey animal creatures, splashing in the pool, and socializing, and all other sorts of things that creatures do in and around pools. The vision went, and was clouded (by his old age, he thought — although he was not all terribly that old), and he looked still over a plain, vast desert. The bird cocked its head to one side, and Maverick leaned in that same direction, and then he

walked on to somewhere else. Down a path that led to another hill, that led to a path, that led back to his cave. And he sat down on a rock outside the cave, with the bird still on his shoulder, though he didn't really feel it now, and hardly had to work any extra, if at all, he told himself once, though he didn't fully believe it himself, and had been trying to exert more energy to his right shoulder than he actually needed. He sat, and forgot about the bird for a time, but when he turned and looked, there it stood, still on his shoulder. He brushed it away absent-mindedly, but it flew back, and he left it there absent-mindedly, thinking.

After a time, he ate the other half of the goat (it was a small goat) and was very full, and lay out on the rocky soil in a place where there was more foliage and grasses than in other places, and he looked up at the stars again. The bird sat with him, though it never looked up (for who ever saw a bird that could look up?) and gazed off across the hills. He tried to find more constellations, more shapes in the sky, but he couldn't find any more than yesterday. He made some up: there was the tree, and the boulder, and the house — there was a whale, too, a fish with a huge body and a tail. Suddenly, the bird called out into the night, the sound coming from behind him and to his left, and then Maverick saw a shape of a bird in the night sky, with its wings spread, flying across the sky. He looked behind him and the bird was gone. He looked back up at the sky, and the stars in the bird constellation were still there, outlining the shape of the bird flying through the heavens.

He went to sleep under the stars that night.

When he woke up the next morning, there was a rabbit for him to eat. He cooked it, then looked around for stones to circle the fire pit with. He brought lots of stones, and the circle around the fire pit was about seven feet across the center. He went down to the crest again, and, looking out, saw the desert again, with the oasis, which looked much closer than before. He felt as though he could walk to it, but decided to try after lunch. He went

back to the fire pit and ate the rabbit he found there, then went back to the crest and began walking towards the oasis with the large, grey creatures, across the desert. The walk didn't take long. When he got there, he looked around and saw all the grey animals, as though he were in a dream, with creatures that ignored him for the most part but didn't step on him, although they were much bigger than him — some were as tall as three men placed on top of each other, with the one's feet on the other's head, and where a man's or dog's nose was on these creatures there was a long, snake-like thing that swung about. They used it like a hand or straw, sucking in water or grabbing at other creatures. Some of their ears were giant, and some were not. They were a very friendly species, and Maverick thoroughly enjoyed walking in their presence. He felt years younger walking among them, though he doubted he looked it, except for the lighter step in his walk, and the smile that was now on his face. Some of the creatures were bathing themselves, some were bathing their young, some were bathing each other. Some were hugging with their giant, rope-like noses, some were fighting, some were playing. It was a whole community of animals that he had never seen, acting very much like people. He spent the day there, and drank out of the pool, and went back when the sun began to set. He slept outside again, and felt no colder than when he had slept in the cave.

The next day he went back to the oasis. One of the animals had died, and they all gathered around it, bowing their heads down and rolling on their backs as though they were mourning. Some of the older ones had begun digging a hole a ways off, away from the pool. Maverick watched as the hole grew deeper and deeper. and the animals scooped dirt out with their feet and arm, which is what he called the long rope-thing attached where their nose should have been. The others began to push the body toward the hole and, when the older diggers decided that it was big enough, the body was pushed in and covered with dirt. They sat around the burial ground for a time. Then,

one by one, they each returned to the pool, appearing to be contemplating the meaning of life and death.

Days went by like this. Maverick always slept outside, and gradually felt less and less old and fragile. One day, he went into the village and bought an axe on credit from a kind farmer who pitied the look of him. Going back up into the hills, to one of the hills on which grew trees, he began to cut them down and haul them up to the crest from which he could see the oasis. There he began building himself a house, the first he had built for himself in his whole life. The bird who continued to feed him now helped him carry the huge logs, and, though it would have looked to an outsider as though the bird were merely riding on the trunks of the trees while an extremely strong man dragged them up a hill or trying to help but in reality not doing much at all, Maverick and the bird knew exactly who was doing what and how much of the act at hand, namely, the carrying of heavy burdens, one should attribute to either man or bird.

Before many months were past, the house was built. It was sealed with mud and dense clay, and the roof was covered with leaves and moss. It was just big enough for one man to live in, and it was more than enough for him. He had built into it a window out of which he could watch the creatures. He had given them a name by now: Ellefourant, because they were about four ells high, and he could think of no other characteristic by which they were all the same, save the rope-like nose, but that, he considered, was too sacred to name so special an animal after. Some of them had tusks like a boar, but some did not. Some had big ears, some had small ears. Some had tails, some did not — they all had different looks in their eyes and faces. The only thing by which they were connected was that all the adults were between three and four ells tall, and so for this he named them. He lived in his house for several days like this, gazing at the Ellefourants, going to visit them, eating the food that the bird brought to him, amazingly enough, every day, always a

rabbit, always three, every day. Maverick did not know where it got them, but he did not want to argue with it. He didn't know if he would have been able to if he had even tried.

One day, he went back to the cave and the fire pit and brought one of the rocks that had been around the fire pit back to his new house. He stared at it for some time, thinking and looking. Then he went down to the town again (he had returned the axe) and bought a hammer and chisel on credit. He went back to his house and began chipping away at the stone, carving and chiseling and looking out the window every now and then. When he was satisfied that this one would never look like more than an ugly blob, he threw it out the window and went to bed.

The next day he went back to the fire pit and got a new stone. He chipped at this one and carved it and looked out the window, and at the end of the day he left it and went to bed. The next day he got up and continued carving. He moved outside to carve — after a few days of this, he looked at what he had done. It was a poor representation of an Ellefourant. He frowned and left it outside. He slept that night.

The next day he went back to the fire pit to get another stone. This one he worked at for a week, and it was still an unsatisfactory representation.

One day a little boy came up to the hills, exploring. He came across the old man's hut, and saw the carvings of the Ellefourants. He squealed with joy and knocked on Maverick's door.

Maverick answered.

"What do you want?" he asked, not unpolitely.

"Did you carve those stones outside?" the boy asked.

"Yes," Maverick said; for he was not one to lie about anything, much less a trivial matter such as this.

"Could I have one, please?" the boy asked, for he loved stone carvings,

and one of them was just small enough that it could become a plaything for him.

"If you wish," Maverick said. "I have no objections. Take whichever one you wish." And then he closed the door and looked out the window and listened for the sound of the boy lifting and carrying one of the stones away.

The boy did, and brought it back to the village, and played with it, as boys are wont to do. Some of the other village children saw it, and wanted it or one like it for themselves. They asked the boy where he had gotten it, and he said up in the hills from a man there who carved more like it. So the children all went to their mothers and fathers and told them that there was a man in the hills who carved beautiful stone carvings, and some of the adults knew that it was Maverick, and some did not, and they all wanted to see him, some to see who it was that had fascinated their children, and some to see an old friend. So they went up into the hills, and asked Maverick if he had any more sculptures like the one he had made for the little boy down in the village. Maverick was terribly surprised, because he had not made the Ellefourant sculpture for the little boy, and because he did not know that anyone else would want it. But the mothers said that it was beautiful, and the fathers said that it was fine craftsmanship, and they all said that they would buy more if he made them. Maverick bid them all go home, and they did, and he thought that night. The bird sat on the foot of his bed as he went to sleep that ˇ night.

In the morning, he went back to the pit, and carried another rock back to his home. He carved it into an Ellefourant — it only took him the day this time — and he took it into his house and stood it up next to the door. The next day a man came up with a sack of gold coins, and asked if Maverick had any stone carvings he could purchase. Maverick said yes, one, and the man bought it for three gold coins, enough for three nights stay at the inn in town. The next day, there was no rabbit waiting for him. He went down to the

village, purchased some food, and repaid the man from whom he had bought the chisel and hammer, and from that day on, he lived by the money that came from his carvings. He was happier too, and did not feel as old as he was, so full of joy was he when he chiseled away at the stone, creating the animals that he loved, and gazing off into the distance at them, sometimes going out for the day to visit, but always making sure to carve his Ellefourants. He began to get very, very good, and soon people from other villages were coming to look at his statues, and marveling at their complexity of emotion, their beauty, their elegance. Each ellefourant had an expression unique to it on its face, and each body shape was different, and the ears were all different sizes. They were truly astounding, and word began spreading far and wide about the man who could carve these creatures whom he had discovered (people also came to the oasis to see his ellefourants, although he did not tell them about it or show them where it was). Some weeks he would spend all his waking hours carving, and was never happier than when he finished an ellefourant and saw it smiling, or laughing, or mourning back at him.

One day, the boy who had lived in the village and first seen his sculptures, now that he was older, went back up into the hills to watch Maverick carve. He watched him all day, but, not having the courage to ask what he wanted to ask, went back down into the village, slept, and came back up the next day. After a couple of hours, the boy asked Maverick:

"Can you teach me how to carve stone like you are carving now?"

Maverick looked up and replied, "I cannot teach you, but you can watch, and learn if you can. I will not mind."

So the boy did.

He helped Maverick carry stones from around the hills back to his house, lugging them from all corners of the reachable map — and no matter how many stones they seemed to take, there were always more to get, more

to carve, more in abundance for the old man, Maverick. The boy watched carefully every chip, every stroke of the hammer. He never talked while the old man was carving, but, when they both would eat, asked him questions about where he learned to carve such beautiful ellefourants, and how he had discovered them when no one else had, even though an entire village lived not too far from the oasis, and where he had lived before. The old man always just smiled and nodded, and said, “That’s right,” and never really answered the questions. The boy still sat and watched. Still sat and watched, and waited, and tried to learn as much as he could about carving.

After a year of coming up every day to the hill, even in the snow or rain or mist, or even clouds, he knew an awful lot about how to carve stone, and the old man had learned alot as well. But he still didn’t know what it was that made the ellefourants Maverick carved so beautiful, so exquisite, so fantastic. He asked Maverick many times, but he never could tell him, so the boy kept watching. Some days, he would take the hammer and chisel when the old man was not using them (he asked his permission) and take one of the smaller rocks, about the size of one or two of his fists put together, or any amount in between, and would try to carve an ellefourant, and some nights he would come up and work by the light of a candle or the moon or the stars, but he could never make ellefourants quite like the old man did.

One day, he asked the old man how he created such beautiful ellefourants out of such plain blocks of stone, as he had asked him many times before. This time, the old man stopped his work and looked at the stone and said:

“I could never create such beautiful ellefourants. I never have. You see, boy, there is an ellefourant trapped inside each of these blocks of stone — and it is my job merely to bring them out, to release them, you see. I am a releaser of ellefourants, not a creator, not a carver. Not really.”

Then he went back to his work.

The boy thought about this for several days, during which he continued to watch the old man carve ellefourants. Then, one day, the boy began to carve again, when the old man was not carving, as he normally did. And he sweated and he labored, and he was nervous that he might hurt the ellefourant inside the stone — but he carved nonetheless, pushing through the nagging fear and carving away at the thing, trying not to damage the animal inside, but hoping that he would be able to carve away the excess. When he was done, he showed it to the old man, afraid of what he would say.

The old man looked at it and said:

"There is still much stone left on that ellefourant." He smiled and turned it over in his hands. "Yes, this is a much smaller ellefourant than you think. It has been trapped in this stone for too long." And then he handed it back to the boy, and carried on eating.

So the boy carved at it until it was so small that he did not think he could chisel any more off without an ear or trunk coming clean off, and then he brought it home and set it aside and kept it safe from the other children.

About a month passed, and the old man asked the boy what had become of the ellefourant he had carved so many days ago, and the boy said that he still had it, and the old man asked if he could see it. And so the boy went down to the village to get it, and brought it up to the old man to look at. And Maverick said:

"Hmm. I'm terribly sad that you've been keeping him locked up for so long. Especially after going to all that length to free him, for now he can run and look around and things. Hmm. He should be very happy now."

And from then on he allowed the boy to carve ellefourants with him, and the boy collected profits from his own sculptures, and they worked together very happily — and the boy got his own hammer and chisel, so they would work side by side. The boy's family sometimes came to see him work alongside the greatest stone carver the world had ever known, but soon they

tired of it, and went back to working, or cooking, or talking with others in the village, or playing with the other children. But the boy, whose name was Gaizka, continued to work in the mountains with Maverick, year after year, and people continued to come from all over to take away a sculpture for themselves, for their own house — for it was said that anyone who possessed such a sculpture was happier than anyone that did not, by virtue of the fact that they had it. When Gaizka turned sixteen years old, and was considered an adult and expected to apprentice to someone, he moved up into the hills and lived with the old man, whose name he now knew was Maverick.

And one day, when Gaizka awoke to find that the old man had died in his sleep, he buried the body and had a funeral all to himself, and took seven days off from carving. Then he carried on carving ellefourants and living in the hut, and to everybody who came asking where the old man who used to carve the ellefourants was, he said that he had passed away, and that he himself was just as capable a carver as the old man. And Gaizka's fame spread like Maverick's had, both for his storytelling and for his stone ellefourants, and people continued to come to buy sculptures, as they had for years and years now. He sculpted ellefourants, and sold them to people, for years afterwards. And he was happy.

One day, a man came to see him from a distant village. He was journeying through the village below the hills with his friends, and while he was there he heard about the carvings, and decided that one of them is just what he needed as a souvenir from this town, from his journeys, so he went up into the hills and bought a medium sized ellefourant that would fit nicely on his mantle. He packed it on the side of his horse and rode back to his home with his friends, all talking and laughing and making merry. He went back to his shop, which was a building just off of the village square, where he and his family lived, and showed them the statue he had acquired for them.

They had never seen a creature that looked anything like the animal the statue was of.

"What is it?" his wife asked.

"An elefrant er somethin'," he replied.

It sat on a shelf in his shop, next to the cloths and things that were his living. He was a tailor, and his wife and daughters spun his regular cloth for him, while the finer cloths he had shipped to him from the sea port, where exotic cloths came from all over the place. His father had taken journeys when he was alive to a peasant's house somewhere out in the country, a day's journey by horse, to procure from there the finest cloth in the land — from this he would make clothes for the town's mayor and other esteemed statesmen of the village, and would charge exorbitantly high prices and receive them in full, oftentimes in advance. The peasant had stopped spinning, however, his father had told him one day, and so there was no more of the now priceless cloth, and most of the people who had piece of clothing made of it held onto them as precious treasures, and rarely wore them for fear that they would become torn or worn and, therefore, less valuable.

The tailor had three children — a daughter and two sons. The daughter was fourteen years old, and he had betrothed her to marry the son of a statesman who was very well to do and had lots of money. The son was sixteen years old, and he was about to be apprenticed as a clerk to his father, which was a very prestigious position to begin an apprenticeship in — he was given responsibility over all the paperwork and legal documents, and he managed the affairs he was given to manage beautifully. However, he was proud and arrogant and Avis, the tailor's daughter, did not like him at all. She was, instead, in love with the son of the man who owned the shop next to her father's, a man who carved wooden figurines to be used as centerpieces of tables or decorations in glass cabinets or shelves or pennants hung around the neck. His son, whose name was Howard, worked hard to help his father,

running the shop when he was gone and staying up late to help him into bed on nights when he came home drunk from the local tavern. In his spare time, he would carve little birds, some of which he left on the counter of the shop, to see whether his father sold them to customers or not. Sometimes he did, and sometimes he didn't.

Howard had been friends with Avis since they were very little, and they had talked together before most other children had discovered conversation at all. Sometimes they played checkers, and sometimes they read to each other from some book that they found in their own family's house, and sometimes they just sat and talked. Some nights they would talk late into the darkness, into the morning. When Avis turned thirteen, she realized that she was in love with Howard, although she had been engaged to the statesman's son for three years already. The wedding was scheduled for the month after she turned fifteen, and she did not want to be married to the brat who was supposed to have "good breeding," although the only thing that he had bred in her was disgust and contempt, the latter of which he himself had for all those whose class and status was lower than his own. Avis was frightened, and went to confide her fears in Howard one night.

"I don't want to marry him," she said, and it was the first time she had ever said it to anyone. "He's a stuck up pig, a wealthy brat, and I don't like him one bit."

Howard nodded. They were sitting outside his father's shop, in the back, in the alleyway between houses.

"You should ask my father if he will let you marry me."

"But the engagement has already been established. The wedding date is set. Why would he listen to me? I am just a boy," Howard replied.

"I will talk to him to," Avis said.

And so she did.

"Father," she said, "why did you betroth me to Fiero (which was the

name of the brat who was the son of the statesman) without my consent?"

"Avis, love," her father replied, "he is from a very well to do family, and I know his father very well — you shall be very well cared for in their family, for the greatest happiness in old age is comfort and money." He said this with assurance of its truth, although every time he repeated it he doubted its veracity.

"But father," she replied, "I love the boy Howard, who is the son of the wood carver who lives next door to us. I have loved him for a long time, and want to marry him, but have been afraid of what you would say. Don't be angry father — I only want to be happy."

"I, too, want you to be happy," her father said, "so I have promised you to be married to a very wealthy man, who is intelligent and capable at his job to boot; he will become a great statesman someday, and then you will be his wife, and won't you be happy then?"

"No," Avis replied simply and plainly and quietly, but loud enough for her father to hear. He simply shook his head and clucked his teeth together such as one might do toward a horse to coax it on.

"You will have to learn to, I suppose," he said, "just as each of my sons shall have to learn to carry on my business. You shall learn. You'll get used to it — don't worry."

Avis cried herself to sleep that night.

The next morning she woke up feeling much better. She found Howard and talked to him in the back alleyway again, saying that the two of them must run away, because her father would not listen to him, and she had already told him about their love and he would have none of it. He agreed, and the two of them planned to run away that night, taking some food and clothes and making for a village or a kingdom where it would be impossible for anyone in the entire world to find them. They discreetly packed some things that day, food and clothes, and some water as well in a leather skin that had

been folded and tied off at the opening.

When both of their fathers began to snore, they met out in the dark streets and began to run, running, running faster... then walking, peacefully and quietly, away from the village. They walked under the light of the moon, under the light of the stars, gazing up at the sometimes, still conscious of the fact that they were supposed to be putting as much distance between them and their families as they wanted to, or at least what was humanly possible in one night. They kept going until they could go no more, and their legs were exhausted from a night's running. They found a patch of trees and went to sleep under them, as the sun was coming up — and the trees' leaves gave them shade, and they were tired, so they slept soundly throughout the day.

That day, each of them had a dream. Avis's dream was like this: a bird who was in a cage flew away as soon as the door was opened, and it was her who had opened the door. When it was out of the cage, it was free and happy — and then she opened the door to the house, and it flew outside, and flew far away, and she was very sad to see it go, because she loved it. And she chased after it, and she almost caught it, but it went just out of her grasp. And she knelt on the ground and cried. Howard's dream was different. It went like this: there was a turtle on the ground in the street (turtles often lay in the street in his town), and a little boy came up to the turtle and tried to pick him up. But the turtle began to swim through the sand in the street, and the boy chased it — and then the turtle started to fly away, like a bird (and now Howard knew it was a dream, for turtles never have been able to fly). He watched the turtle fly to another town somewhere, over the horizon. Then the entire land outside the town he was in, the whole world, was destroyed, mostly by water, some of it just sinking into the depths of the earth, leaving nothing, as is wont to happen in dreams involving the destruction of land. Then the dream ended. Both of them woke up. The sun

was getting ready to set in the sky, as it would in several hours. They looked at each other as they woke up, and talked about their dreams to each other, and each of them felt very much like they should go back, although neither really knew why. They sat and thought and talked about a few things which had no real importance, mostly about their dreams, and then finally got up and went back to the village. Their families had been worried sick about them, and had been searching the village over for them. They returned some hours after sunset, and their fathers found them, and rejoiced at their respective returns (though not at the return of the one who was not their own child) and reprimanded each of them, fed them, and sent them to bed. They each told their parents why they had run away, and that they wanted to marry each other and not some wealthy statesman or woman, or some other wealthy sort of family, but each of them were told that they would never be allowed to marry each other, and their fathers were very angry with them, and they locked them in their rooms for a day in order to punish them for running away.

The next week, Fiero was working in his office, or rather his father's office which he was given free reign of. There was a turtle on his desk. It was a paperweight, and he was using it to hold down the top edge of a scroll upon which he was writing. He had all the most important documents out on the table or in the room at this moment. Suddenly, an elephrant came crashing through the wall if the room and, in a bizarre frenzy akin to the kind of thing you might and often do find in dreams (although this was not one), destroyed all the papers and scattered ink everywhere, leaving through another hole in the building (that is, another one that he made) and ran off. It was the most incredible set of circumstances that Fiero had ever seen, but no one else saw it occur, and they were all of the opinion that he should not have had all the most important documents out at the same time, without first making copies of them individually — because if he had kept them all in

the safe box, they would not have been destroyed, and his father's career would not have been ruined. As it was, it was a very messy business, and Fiero's father was forced to blame the loss of his files on his son, which was very easy to do, of course, and would have been much more difficult, though by no means impossible to convince them all that he was the one to blame, and that his son was innocent. His son's career, therefore, was ruined, and Avis's father, seeing this, withdrew his engagement agreement with Fiero's family and allowed his daughter to marry Howard. They were married several years later, when Howard had set up his own shop on the other side of town, and they lived there happily together for many, many years, happily, being happy, and what's more content to boot.

Avis's youngest brother, who still lived at home with her father when she was married to Howard, by the time they had their first child was supposedly to be obligated to start learning the family business, together with his older brother — the two of them were expected to carry on the family business. The older brother was willing to stay and learn, but the younger brother despised it. He learned the trade, because he was forced to and had no other way of earning bread or board, but after three years of the training he was sick of it. In the middle of the night, he stole away and ran to a far away kingdom, not stopping and not looking back and never sleeping, but always running. He stumbled across the threshold of the first city he came to in the kingdom (which was the one in which the king himself resided) and found refuge under some haystacks. He fell asleep there, hidden from the intruding sight of others.

He slept into the next day and awoke, feeling refreshed. He looked around for the king's palace and, once he had found it, knocked on the door and begged entrance. Now the boy, whose name was Savio, was very clever, with exceeding wit and great charisma, beyond his years, so that when he was admitted before the king, dressed in no fine clothes, he was able to

convincingly make this speech to the king, despite his young years (which were noticed by each and every one of the king's cabinet):

"Oh great and wise king! I have come from a far off kingdom, a peasant in appearance only owing to the hard labor that I have gone through to come upon the secret which I bring to your throne room now. I am the son of a weaver, who, while nothing special in himself, taught me to love the subject and craft as an art, and to pursue it wherever it may lead. The art led me to a secret which I now come to share with your majesty — for I can make the finest clothing in the world, and my talents are at the disposal of your majesty, for a moderate fee. Surely such a king as yourself could use a new wardrobe, if not to replace your current one, as a supplement — for a king such as yourself can never have too many wardrobes, or else I am greatly mistaken."

The king, flattered by his speech and convinced by his charisma, and remembering that he, in fact, did need a new set of clothes, since he had not gotten a new one for nearly a year, and all his weavers and tailors at the time were below adequate or otherwise employed — all this considered, he hired him on the spot, and set him right to work with a loom. The king asked Savio what sort of thread he required to weave the cloth for the suit, and Savio answered, that he could procure his own thread for the cloth, and that, in fact, he had brought it with him in his sack. And the king, not wishing to argue, left the matter and allotted him extra gold in return for supplying his own materials entirely, except for the loom, which the king got to keep and so did not count in the expenses. On top of the charge, however, Savio was allowed a room in the king's own palace and a fresh set of clothes ("So that he could work more comfortably," the king said) and was fed. He always thanked the king with the graciousness of a distinguished visitor for all these things, and put long hours at the loom every day, shut up in a room with a single window looking out over a part of the city and a candle that he lit when

it became dark outside. He worked into the night some nights, and some nights came in early to weave, and the servants would talk about his devotion to his work, and how fabulous a suit of clothes it would be.

After several weeks, the king came to check upon his work. When he stepped into the room, Savio was sitting at the loom, weaving away furiously — but there was no thread at the loom. There was not thread anywhere that he could see, and no cloth either. He was puzzled, and thought at first that Savio might be practicing, and that perhaps he did this every day to ensure that the cloth was as good as it could possibly be.

“Savio,” he called out in a jovial manner, trying to conceal his concern, “can I see the cloth that you have woven for my suit? You must have some quantity by now.”

Savio stopped weaving and turned to look at the king. “But king,” he said, “most of it is folded there under the table — but this is some of my finest work here on the loom. I am nearly done with the weaving, and will begin with the sewing next, which I learned from my mother.”

“This here? On the loom?” the king said; for surely he saw nothing either beneath the table or on the loom.

“Yes. It’s an amazing material — in this cloth, I am trying to weave the shape of a turtle; in the others I have the form of a snake. Your eyes must enjoy the sight immensely, for it is a truly miraculous thread and cloth, you see, because of its magical properties — only the truly wise may see it. Anyone who is wise can see the beautiful patterns, you see, but no one who is not wise can see it. In this way this cloth can help you to rule your kingdom, you see, because you will be able to tell the wise from the unwise statesmen, and therefore have more capable, virtuous men in positions of power, and your kingdom shall flourish. This, then, is an exceedingly wise investment your majesty has made, and you shall be called wise yourself especially throughout the land and in neighboring kingdoms.”

The king, not wishing to admit that he was not wise and could not see any of the cloth at all, kept his mouth silent, and praised the beauty of the cloth and the fine work which Savio had done. Then he went back into his chambers and mourned the fact that he was not wise, which he considered to be the greatest of all possible evils, and unfortunate as well, and then he slept and tried to get the thought out of his head that he might not be wise, but the thought persisted. And he hoped that in the morning he might wake up and be suddenly wise, but then he doubted it, and then he did not, and then he did not know what to think. He eventually fell asleep very restlessly and woke up in the morning feeling not at all rested, but still hoping that there was some hope for his wisdom.

He went down to check on Savio the next day, and he was sitting in his chair sewing, like he said he would — and the needle went up and down and up and down, and his hands were as though they were holding the cloth steady for the needle — every part of his body and the room was in place (the loom was neatly folded up and pushed aside, and patterns were laid out on the ground in the shape of a kingly suit of clothing) except that no thread was anywhere to be found, no scrap of cloth, and the needle continued to penetrate open air. He asked again about the progress of the clothes, and Savio said:

“Oh, I have just started to cut and sew a small piece of the fabric, to see how it would fit together for you, oh wise and august majesty. Your suit shall be completed in about another week or two, at which time I should be very grateful to receive your pay. This is truly a magnificent gift for your highness, if I do say so myself, and you shall enjoy it when it is done. I beg you not to worry about the progress I make, although if it pleases you to come watch me you are by all means welcome. But your majesty must be busy and h ˇave many other, more important matters to attend to. Therefore, do not worry, and I shall finish your suit soon enough.”

The king thanked him and left, still incredibly confused. He attended to matters as normally, but in the back of his mind there was always this worry — was he not truly wise? He had always strove for wisdom, and hi father before him had been acclaimed as a very wise ruler, but what about him himself? What did he need to obtain wisdom? He slept uneasily now, some nights waking up halfway through the night, some days not at all.

The word began to spread that Savio had woven and was sewing a suit of clothes that could only be seen by the truly wise man or woman. Many, many nobles came in to see his work, and all of them, none of them wanting to admit themselves not to be wise, praised its beauty and said how magnificent of a craftsman Savio was — and Savio took all the praise very humbly. He told them a long story about how he learned all about it from a man who lived all by himself on the edge of town, who was a true magician and used his skill to make figurines that had the same effect. Savio told them how he had taught him to raise sheep and spin their wool into thread in such a way as would allow the same magic to work on it, although he never taught him about the magic proper, what it actually was, but only how to make it work — and because of these stories, the people talked about how miraculous the deed that Savio was doing was, and the king decided to give him more gold as compensation for his work, so that it would not appear to the people as though he was a cruel, heartless man who only wanted to procure benefit for himself, but would gladly reward those with exceeding talent like this young man's.

After a few more weeks of work, the suit was completed, and the whole kingdom was talking about the suit of clothes that the king had been made, and how only the truly wise could see it, and the whole town was gathered in the town square, awaiting a procession of the king in his new clothes — each man sure (though in his heart only hoping) that he was truly wise.

The day came, finally, and Savio helped the king dress before a full length mirror. All the while, as he pulled here and tugged there, exclaiming about how marvelously it fit, the king was very worried, as he looked in the mirror and down at his body alike, and saw nothing, no clothes at all. Not only that but he could feel nothing.

"Made of the lightest fabric," Savio said as he dressed the king, "and nobody'll be able to feel its softness, except you, and your wisest nobles, for no one except the truly wise can feel it."

The king almost blew up right there, wanting to strangle the boy and tell him that he did not know what he was talking about, that there was no cloth at all, to exile him from the kingdom, kick him out by the seat of his pants. But there was a part of him that desperately wanted to be considered wise. What if the boy was telling the truth (as he had assumed all along that he was) and the God looked down at his foolishness (that is, rejecting the clothes, the gift from Him who was on high) and laughed, and decided never to give him wisdom? Perhaps, if he wore the clothes enough, their wisdom would rub off on him. He would need to take good care of them...

Savio casually mentioned pay as soon as possible as he was finishing up the final fittings, and the king gestured to a bag on a nearby table, saying that his payment in full was contained in it. Savio bowed low, almost scraping his forehead on the floor, and said that he thanked the king humbly for allowing him to render this service to him — and that he should go outside, for his public was waiting for him — and that, if his majesty did not mind, he would stay here one more night before returning to his homeland, and the king said that he did not mind at all.

So the king went outside to greet his adoring subjects; and when he appeared on the terrace, they all fell silent for a moment, and their hearts dropped into their shoes, in two pieces, one in each shoe, because they could not see any clothing that he was wearing, save for his undergarments. A

moment later, they all began cheering again, because not a one of them wanted to admit that it was him who could not see the garments, and, therefore, not only was looking at the king naked, (more or less in that time and place, undergarments were considered the bare minimum one would wear — only husbands and wives would appear that way before each other — also, it was very cold in that region in the wintertime), not only that, but also that they were not truly wise, and therefore foolish — and not a one of the citizens wanted to admit that he himself was a fool.

The king walked through the street arrayed thusly, and his citizens clapped and applauded and oohed and ahhed, each rapidly correcting his account of the clothing to match that of his neighbors', so that he would not be exposed to be unwise.

As he was coming around a particular corner, past the house of a poor woman who had neither money nor fame nor a husband, even, but a small child who had been sick two months now, but was just better now to get up and move about — as he was passing by this house, the girl happened to step outside the door and see him — and her, not knowing any of the stories about the alleged suit that the king was meant to be wearing, shouted out:

"Mommy, mommy, come look, quick! The king is walking naked through the streets!"

And at that, everybody realized the immense truth of it, and how absurd they all were to imagine anything other than that the king, in fact, had no clothes on at all, and that they had all been deceived. The king blushed a deep shade of royal purple for having been exposed, and ran back to the palace as fast as his legs could carry him. Having got back, and acquired a decent set of outer clothes to cover his near-naked form, he demanded at once to see Savio, to have him reprimanded and booted from the country permanently, as he would have done earlier that day had not madness seized him and he been convinced to stroll about his capital city wearing nothing but

underwear. But Savio was gone, and he had taken the bag of gold coins with him, a small price for the king to pay after so much humiliation. He sent guards after Savio, but they could not find him anywhere. He had left without a trace, taking with him a bag of heavy gold coins and the citizens' respect for their king.

Savio had run as soon as the king was outside the palace, taking the gold and the clothes he had on his back, and running in the direction he knew the sea port to be. About one hour out, he found a little nook in the ground, a cave of sorts, and he stopped and hid inside of it, in case the king would send guards after him — and he slept there that day, until night came, when he upped again and, after feeling for his gold coins inside the bag and opening it to count a few, he set off again toward the port, toward the ships and the open sea, he said to himself.

Upon arriving there, he deposited most of his money at a good, reputable banker, and then inquired at the docks as to whether he could rent a boat or not — they replied that he could, but, since he was too young, he could only get a very small one, since that was all they would allow him to have.

"In that case," he said to them, "would you kind gentlemen allow me to buy a boat from you? The smaller the better, if it makes the two of you comfortable."

And so they showed him the choices he had, which were many, since there were many small boats that they wished to get rid of, and this little one seemed like a young, inexperienced sort of man whom they could swindle and get more than the vessel was worth out of him for it. His eyes lighted upon one called "Little Jay," and he though it to be good right away — it was a one man ship with some cargo space below deck, and he asked them how much they wanted for it. After offering half of what they asked for, he proceeded to haggle the price back and forth (less forth than back) and,

after much more trouble that the owners of the boat had anticipated, agreed upon a price. Gold exchanged hands, and Savio leapt into the boat immediately and took off into the bay. He sailed about a little, trying to get a feel for the craft. He sailed along the coast for many hours in one direction, and eventually he stopped in at a different port that he came across and, once ashore, inquired as to whether or not there was anything that the villagers there needed transported and sold somewhere else, and that he would willingly do the work for them, and would bring them back whatever it was that it fetched for them. Most of the villagers were skeptical, but one man, a shepherd by trade, was curious to see how much his wool would fetch in another city. So he loaded up Savio's vessel with as much as it could carry (slightly less — there needed to be room for Savio) and Savio set sail farther up the coast. He sailed through the night and came to another port many hours later, and inquired there in the marketplace (since it was morning) whether or not they needed any wool. And they did, and asked what he demanded for it; and he demanded quite a bit, but not enough to send them looking elsewhere, since it was good wool, so they bought it. And Savio, getting back into his little ship and sailing back to the other village, with the shepherd, found the shepherd and gave him the money he had fetched for it, after the percentage that he himself had taken — and it was so much money, and so little work on his own part, that the shepherd was very impressed, and many more people were very impressed with his work, and they all wanted him to sell their things in other cities. And he replied that he had no bigger vessel, but a nearby said that he could get him one easily, and to come see which one he preferred, if he would buy it from him. So Savio went to look, and there was one vessel which needed a crew of about five (though it could be manned by less and by more). It was called "El Tortuga," and he liked it right away, and was fond of it, and asked if he could give the man his little boat and a sum of money for the big one. The man agreed, and

Savio spent the night in that town.

The next day, he up and went back to the first town he stayed at to take out money enough from the bank to pay the man for “El Tortuga.” Once he had the boat in his possession, he went about collecting a crew, and hiring them for daily wages — and he found some he liked (most older than him) and named one of them captain and himself owner and first mate. He sailed about in his merchant ship for many years this way, going to and fro, and learning all there was to learn about sailing. He was very happy in his endeavours, and after a time declared himself the captain of the ship, when the captain he had appointed earlier said that he would like to retire. Sailing about this way, he made quite a large fortune, and was quite happy sailing from port to port, and selling the things he collected — it was always him who did the selling, for he could never trust anyone else.

About fourteen years or so after he first began his trading business, he hired a little cabin boy to work for him, since the boy seemed capable and needed a job, and wanted to work on the sea. The boy did an exceptional job at his work, and Savio noticed — the boy, whose name was Ross, climbed quickly through the ranks, being promoted after the first month to deck hand, and after the first year to first mate. Savio loved the boy dearly, and taught him everything that he had learned about sailing. Ross learned quickly, and soon was capable enough to become captain of the ship himself, only he could not, since Savio was unwilling to give up his post as captain for nearly anything, so much was he enjoying his life commanding a merchant vessel and selling the things at a much greater price than most other people were able to.

Ross, seeing that Savio would never give up his position on the boat and wishing to be the captain of his own boat — and also wishing to explore the vast oceans in search of new territory, new lands, new peoples, new things and foods and clothing — in this Ross took his leave of “El Tortuga,” after

being aboard it for seven years, and went to purchase his own boat and crew and supplies. Using all the money he had received as wages from Savio (he had kept almost entirely all of it, and so there was quite a bit to be had), he purchased a boat called “The Goldfish,” and hired a crew of about ten. It was a big boat, and lots of stores fit below. He told his men all that they were going out into the open sea to explore uncharted territory, and that they would bring home a map of the places they had visited in their expedition, and that they would be acclaimed throughout history as the ones who discovered the said places and brought their knowledge home to their city and the neighboring cities. The men all liked the sound of this, and approved exceedingly of the concept, and asked if they could start sailing as soon as possible. Ross, knowing that they could not possibly start until they had provisions enough for the journey, waited until they were adequately stocked below deck for three months at sea of relatively comfortable living (that is, relative to a slave laborer on a whaling vessel or something of the like) before he allowed the men into the ship to set off. Pointing his rudder to the east, away from the land, into the rising sun, he weighed anchor and set sail, into the great expanse of the vast unknown sea.

They sailed for many days with no sign of land in either direction: front, back, up or down. The crew began to grow worried, and they complained to Ross that they could not see land anymore, and that, therefore, they did not know where it was. But Ross calmed them, telling them that he knew, because the sun always rose and set in the same place in the sky every morning and evening, and the stars were always the same every night, and not different and random like it appeared to some of the less educated. He knew, Ross said, where they were, and he would be perfectly willing to show any of them that were curious how he knew, but none of them asked, and although one of them already knew, the first mate, and was experienced in navigation and mapmaking, he did not say a word in

defense of the captain.

They continued sailing on, on and on, the prow of the ship cutting through the water like a well-wielded chisel through rock — artfully and gracefully. One day, a speck of sorts appeared on the horizon, almost a full quarter turn north from where they were.

"Captain," the crow's nest called out to him, "I think there might be land at about north by north by northeast. Shall we head for it?"

Ross looked out over the waters. "We have to," he said. "We must."

And so they did.

They reached the island about noon the next day. Landing on the sandy beach, they began to explore. The island was incredibly fertile with all manner of living things, and in the middle of it shot up a great mountain, like a tree in the middle of a field. They began to look around immediately for good things to eat, and found a few plants and fruits which they tried, only one of which they decided they actually liked. Ross, however, leaving the ship anchored about a hundred yards off the beach and the boats pulled ashore some adequate distance (he cleverly accounted for the tide, if it should come in and they be gone for too long to stop the boats from being pulled out to sea), set off to explore farther in. He said to himself, and to a couple crew members standing close by:

"The first thing is to find out whether or not the island is inhabited by anybody — the second to find out whether they are friendly or not."

He went, it seemed, throughout the whole of the island, with a few crew members, and could find neither trace of civilization nor civilization itself. The island was not big, only about six or seven miles in circumference, and was, as far as Ross and his men could tell, completely uninhabited, but perfectly habitable. The day had been spent in mapping out the size of the island and determining its inhabited state (whether it was or wasn't), and so they returned to the ship to sleep for the night, since they had set up no

sort of habitation on the island, and, besides, all their food and belongings were there.

The next day, they rowed back to the island, and Ross suggested that they make a full and thorough exploration of the mountain, that perhaps some humans lived on it (although it looked doubtful — it was very craggily near the top, and very hard throughout, and in all just not good for living on, they observed from a distance). And so they set out to explore it. They circled around it in groups, checking everywhere they could think to look for signs of habitation — under rocks, beneath things — but they could find none. As they approached the top, some of the men began to get hot, which they attributed to them being out in the open under the hot sun, and very close to it too. It began to become clear to them, however, and very soon, that the heat was coming from the mountain itself, and, more specifically, the top of the mountain. Ross reached the peak of the mountain first, which they could all see very clearly from the boats, and which looked very flat from there. But, lo and behold, it was not flat, but hollow rather — a vast hole opened up from the top and into the earth, and spewed forth hot air in thin blasts every now and then, and the air was hot besides the existence of these blasts of hotness. There was not a bird in the sky, but from the depths of the whole they could hear a kind of whistling as though some poor, lonesome bird were trapped down there, and they had been sent there to free it — but, regardless of the delusion, no one dared to venture down into it. Captain Ross looked down into the depths and decided that they should look more carefully to find if there was another way inside first, before they went down contrary to the hot blasts — for if there were blasts that hot coming from a hole that deep, surely whatever lay at the bottom was exceedingly and very much hotter and more dangerous than the wind they felt at the top. The whole crew agreed, and they searched the mountainside again, this time more eagerly, looking for caves or outlets, since they knew

now that the inside of the mountain was hollow.

One of the crew found it: a rock covering a terribly small tunnel that seemed to lead down into the center of the mountain, if one used one's imagination, or even if two used both of theirs put together. They looked inside the whole, and no one could see anything two metres back. Captain Ross put his arm into it as far as it could go, and wiggled it around — and he said that it expanded a great deal just inside, so they all began to pull at rocks and stones and try and widen the opening so that one or more of them could go down into the mountain that blew out hot air so that they could explore inside it.

Ross was the first one inside — next his crow's nest and second mate. The first mate he told to stay outside, so that if anything bad happened to him, the ship would still be in good hands (to which the second mate would have taken terrible offense, because he considered himself to be a much better sailor than the first mate, but he very badly wanted to see what was inside the mountain, so he shut up).

They crawled on their elbows and stomachs at first, and then their hands and knees. Soon, it opened up so that they could almost stand, although they had to keep ducking to avoid hitting their heads on irregularities and things like that. The floor was hard and sticky (or was that their shoes? they couldn't remember what they'd stepped in) and the air was very, very hot. The crow's nest was for taking his shirt off, but the captain knew that they all needed to keep all their clothes on, for protections sake, no matter how uncomfortable it was — because they would burn much easier without their shirts on, especially if they brushed up against a particularly hot or scorching piece of rock, and burnt for lack of protection. Thus, they kept all their clothes on, and crept inward, amazed at what they had seen, and hoping to discover something surpassing all that they had seen thus far in newness and glorious unfamiliarity.

Journeying deeper into the mountain, they pushed against the sweltering heat, which made simple things like walking and thinking almost unbearable. Finally, the tunnel opened out into something, and Ross was the first one to the edge, looking out over where the floor dropped off into a chasm that went down fifty, maybe a hundred yards. The heat was ridiculous here, but they stayed and looked — they had come this far, and they needed to see whatever it was that was the reward for their long, perilous journey inward, into the earth. They looked over the edge and down, and were utterly baffled and frightened. The floor of the cavern, fifty yards down, was red, and glowing, red and beautiful and ugly and awesome and terrible all at the same time. It seemed to move, and every so often would make a loud noise, and then soon following it, a hot blast would come up, hotter than the air around them, even, and pass their face. Sweat was rolling off their bodies. They looked up, and the cavern bent, but the could see the sky, like a faint sliver or the glimmering light you could see if you were small enough to fit inside one of those conch shells and looked out the opening from just far enough inside the thing.

They had reached the very center of the island, they decided — the inside, core center — and found that it was burning. Perhaps all islands burnt inside like this, they thought, and decided to make investigation of this at the other islands that they encountered henceforth, but not all other islands would have a mountain on them, certainly, so they would not all be testable in the same way. Thus, satisfied with their observations and nearly overpowered by the overpowering heat level, Ross, the crow's nest, and the second mate returned back the way they had come as quickly as they could. An hour had passed, and the rest of the crew was already becoming worried, although you can hardly explore anything halfway decently in any less than an hour, and they had expected him to be out again after a half an hour or so. They went back to the boats, and asked the captain what he had seen. The

outside air felt so cool on his skin (the others had been outside the whole time, so it was still very hot to them) that it took him some time to calm down and cool off adequately, only after which could he tell them what had happened inside the mountain. There had been, he said, a boiling lake of coals, burning and terrible and ferocious, and it had been red and hot like the hottest fire they had ever seen. And it had frightened both the captain and the crow's nest (although the second mate was only a little bit miffed, and not at all awed by the sight). The crew, too, was frightened by the description they were given, and voted unanimously (or at least nearly) that they should leave the island immediately and set out to continue their course onward, exploring new, less mysterious, less ominously dangerous things, they said, for although each of them was stouthearted and brave in a fight, not a one of them could stand to abide by what they could not understand.

At that moment, the entire island shook beneath them, and some of them were knocked to their knees, and some of them cried out, and all of them were even more sorely afraid than before, and more immediately. They all rushed to the boats, therefore, and left immediately, getting into the ship and sailing off. When they were about a half hour off (in other words, not very far at all), they heard an exceedingly loud sound behind them — and they all turned and looked, and, the island which they had just left was in flames, and smoking as though it had been set on fire. And the smoke billowed up, and as they looked on there was an explosion. and fire billowed from the mountain top — and they considered themselves very lucky to have been saved from the incineration that would have befallen them, and cursed for ever having set foot on it. They sailed due east again, and Captain Ross set about writing in his journal about the event immediately.

They sailed on for another week, and had depleted about one third of their stock of food and other supplies. They were all doing moderately well, and Captain Ross still knew exactly where they were in relation to their

homeland. They would not admit it, but they were pacified mainly because, at this point, they still had opportunity to turn back, and so were less frightened by the vastness before them, since they knew they had recourse from going too far away from their homeland, and therefore felt safe.

Before long, they came across another land mass, which looked like an island, although it could have been a giant peninsula. They sailed around it, and it took them a whole day to do so, starting in the morning and ending just before the sun set. They anchored some distance off shore, and spent the night there. That night, they heard human cries coming from the island, not wailing or angry or scary, just cries in the night, loud and clear, and they therefore knew it was inhabited. They slept in mild unease and anticipation that night.

The next morning, the captain led an expedition ashore, and they began mapping out the island immediately (they had already measured its perimeter from the ship, roughly). They had hardly mapped a hundred feet of beach and trees (there were a few on the beach), when, from behind a rock or tree or something a ways up along the short, there jumped out a man dressed in lizard skins who looked frightened and as though he felt he should assert whatever power he could at the moment, but didn't know quite how to, especially with such strangely dressed men as the crew of "The Goldfish." Ross stepped forward as the captain of the ship, and addressed him without words, in the sort of non-verbal way that is all that was left to peoples who do not speak the same language, or to those who have never learned a language in their life (although I have never met any such person, and neither the lizard-skin-clothed man nor Captain Ross were such men).

Captain Ross bowed to the man, and the man made a similar sort of gesture, bowing halfway, and with one foot in front of the other, in such a stance as fencers take when facing an opponent, only bowing forward, which is something you will never see a fencer do, unless he is saluting an opponent

in some strange fashion (which I have never seen at tournaments) or wants very badly to get scored on in the back or side or top of the head, which is legal target in some tournaments. The man righted himself, and hesitantly sort of beckoned the captain and his crew to follow him, then turned and walked off, in a manner that was sort of a limp, but healthy and athletic enough to make it impossible to equate whatever he was doing with his legs with a limp, however difficult to believe it was that he walked this way because he chose to.

They followed him, all of them, partly because they were curious, toward the center of the island (which was much bigger than the first). They followed him through woods which were less dense and more sandy, and in general less impressive than the woods of the other island had been. They came after about a half hour of walking and following to a distinct clearing, with houses that were like huts and spaces that were like streets or paths, at least, and there were very few people to be seen from where they stood. The lizard-skin-clothed man led them through the village to a sort of fire pit, which looked like the center of the village life, and there was a man there who had a big hat who held himself like the chief of the tribe, made of leaves and other natural things, few of which the crew of the Goldfish recognized. He drew near, and made a motion with his hand to indicate that they were welcome, and could sit down. They all sat down together, the chief and the crew, and the crew waited expectantly and with a little fear, since they had heard many stories about tribes that made human sacrifice and tortured intruders, and they hoped very much that this was not one of those sorts of tribes.

The chief called to a man to bring something, and he came over with what looked like a books, thin sheets of some sort of material with drawings and scribblings on them. The chief opened it and began showing them things. Making gestures and sounds, he tried to explain diagrams which appeared in

the book-like thing, most of which no one had ever seen the like of before. A few he got very excitable about, and enjoyed looking at them immensely. Some of the drawings were of lizards, and looked as though they were diagrams of their different parts and anatomies. They came to one page which Ross and the first mate especially recognized, and he bid the chief stop at it so that he could examine it. It was a map of the nighttime sky, with all the stars in their various places drawn out with astounding accuracy. It looked as though it had been made in a school or university back on the mainland rather than on an island which had appeared to be rather primitive and was certainly very much out of the way of what they had known to be intellectual societies. There was no mistaking, however, that this map was of the finest quality — at the bottom of the page was some markings which he assumed to be time charts for the different times of year, and longitudes and latitudes, and he confirmed as much through hand gestures sweeping across the sky and pointing to the sun and various points on the horizon. He understood now that this was a very civilized tribe and society, and was anxious to learn their language as soon as possible and gather as much as he could (and give to them, of course) so that he could bring their knowledge back to his own people and, in this way, make one more step toward the connecting of the whole world in thought and story. For they, Captain Ross assumed, had their own histories, and their own stories and folk tales, which it would take him weeks and years to learn, and he knew that he might be able to spend his whole life here in the pursuit of learning and discussing and resting.

He and his crew began right away learning the language, and pulled the ship ashore and anchored it there, so that it would not float away ever, nor would it be unduly damaged by storm winds (there was bound to be some damage, they knew, if the winds were hard enough). They were welcomed graciously, and given homes and food to eat, and those who wanted them

were given jobs after a time, for, although vacation is a wonderful thing, and all the more tempting to indulge in while on a tropical island far from civilization, the hands cannot be idle for too long, or else the owner of them becomes sluggish and good for nothing, even the enjoyment of his own pleasures. So they began to do their part in the production of food and the farming of lizards and things, which the tribe grew plentifully and for all purposes. The skin they used for clothing (it was very soft when tempered properly, and comfortable and flexible to wear), the meat they used for eating, mostly, although they provided only about as much sustenance as a rabbit might (a little more sometimes, sometimes a little less), and various other parts were used for various other, scientific uses, most of which the crew of the Goldfish were never able even to understand, although the captain was able to comprehend several concepts at length, both relating to and not relating to the lizards.

One of these concepts was that of their conception of the world. They had discovered, on the island, which was called Kailash, that the earth, the entire earth, in fact, was a sphere, rounded on all sides, something which most of the crew had never even considered before (although Ross and his first mate had fairly often) and which no one had ever been able to prove one way or another — that is, whether it was a sphere or not, and, if not, what kind of shape it was, in fact. But the Kailashians had known now for generations, and one their more esteemed scientists had given a proof which the children were given to learn at a certain age. They were all very well educated in the different parts of their island. They could do mathematics and philosophy very thoroughly, all of them, even — no, especially — those who tended to the lizards, since they had to know the importance of their job and what each of the many parts of the lizard did, and how their different actions affected those different parts.

Captain Ross would often talk with the chief, whose name was Kavi,

once he had learned the language, and the two of them would exchange pieces of their culture with each other. Captain Ross told him all about the art of sailing, and what foods are grown and eaten, and how their society works in respect to businesses and monarchies and governments, and he told them all about the communal nature of their tribe (they were less than five hundred people all together), how they all worked together toward a common goal, under common organization, and each man or woman was paid according to his or her production, so that laziness was not an issue among their tribe, and having it was considered a disease, since it gave the possessor of it nothing whatsoever. There was stealing, but the thieves were punished and humiliated and fined, and they rarely if ever did so again. Three crimes committed (violence, thievery, or outright disrespect) or one murder was enough to subject one to the possibility of a death penalty, and if out of the entire tribe the majority voted you dead, you were taken to a natural hole that had formed on the northeast corner of the island, and, after being allowed sever ·al speeches to various members of the tribe, the chief and your family included, you were given the opportunity to jump honorably into the abyss.

If you refused, however, or were unable, as many of the cowardly thieves or murderers were, your hands and feet were tied and you were pushed by long poles, to show that those pushing you would have nothing to do with you. The people who pushed with the long poles were well-trained and strong, so that you could not get around them if they did not want you to (and they didn't) and their skill was such that, no matter what one tried, one could not escape from them, if one had been condemned — they would close in around you and first try to push you from the abdomen, but if you slid around their poles, they would spread out, high, low, and to the side, so that no matter where you tried to slide, they would catch you and push you over into the chasm. There were some who tried to grasp the poles and pull their

assailants with them, and these, if they grasped the pole while they were still standing above, would get hit hard in the face to stun them, and then pushed; but if they were falling while they held the pole, the pole was just released, so that it fell into the hole with them, for there was no reason to keep it above, and they would not grudge the exiled member of their tribe so small and insignificant a parting gift as the one such a man chose. Fighting your punishers was generally seen as dishonorable, since the entire tribe had voted on the matter, and so those criminals who wished to maintain some sort of semblance of honor rarely did it.

The hole was deep, and the bottom could not be seen, and the smell of rotting flesh would emanate from it for months afterwards, sometimes. It was often assumed that they would die simply from the fall itself, or rather from landing after such a fall and, it was presumed, breaking their back or neck or skull, but there was one man from whom, after having fallen for ten and a half seconds — after which time their mathematicians had calculated he would have fallen about 1045 credits (about equivalent to 605 meters), a credit being a unit they had developed which remained absolute, as opposed to the foot which Ross's fatherland used, which changed with the length of the new king's foot — after falling for ten and a half seconds, the man cried out with a bloodcurdling cry, having neither died nor broken his neck, as his vocal chords and lungs were still perfectly able to work, and he cried out to the members of his tribe, howling and writhing in pain for nearly ten minutes straight afterwards. Babies began crying, and parents covered their ears. Grown men and women began to become agitated, because they were not expecting a retaliation of the already dead in their eyes, and the children clung to their parents or inched toward the huts in order to get away from the horrible screaming. He cried out in excruciating pain for days afterwards, though not continuously, and his cries (when he unleashed them) could be heard within the village itself at night or on a quiet day, which was several

miles away from the hole. Seven days after his “execution,” a rough rain storm pelted the island, and the people secured their tents and belongings doubly and brought the lizards under the protection of buildings made of a sort of resin and bark mixture (which was what all their buildings, both public and private, were made out of, for the most part). After that, there were no more screams, and people assumed that he had drowned. After that, it became common for criminals condemned to die in their speeches to beg that they be killed quickly beforehand, either by breaking their neck or severing their head from their body or by hanging, but it was never the case that this was allowed; they were never killed before they went into the pit, and always were given the option of jumping themselves rather than being pushed.

Captain Ross found certain aspects of their culture fascinating, such as the raising of children apart from their parents for the first three years, and with trained “baby raisers.” The people on Kailash, Kavi explained, had studied how different babies are raised, and it was discovered that babies raised a certain way in the first few years (by caring, loving “raisers”) were more likely to grow up to become ideal citizens, to question the world around them and to treat their fellow tribe members kindly. The process may be continued, some had said, but overall it had been found better if the child was returned to their parents to be raised after a time, since it was a strain for the “baby raisers” to raise so many babies, and after several more years of keeping the children, the amount would have become nearly unbearable.

He was also very interested in the way the people walked, which was exceedingly strange to him. Every member of the tribe, when they were walking to and fro (but not always while they were working or needed to get somewhere particularly fast — then they usually broke form) but as a rule, it was good form to walk as the first man they had seen had walked when

they first saw him — with that sort of limp, that is, uneven and awkward for the crew and captain to watch, but still very athletic and showing no signs of injury or failing muscles. It seemed almost impossible that they should choose to walk like they did, but it was not, and Kavi explained it to him with a story:

The walk, Ross had noted, was peculiar in that the rule was to keep one leg perfectly straight, as though held in a cast — and some or other of the members of the tribe employed the use of a cast or other firm holding, and some others kept their legs straight through sheer muscle memory and a sort of strength of the sinews. The leg was not always the same from person to person, or from day to day, or from hour to hour, for sometimes a person would switch which of their legs was straight and which was allowed to bend. Many of the children went around with casts on (alternating the legs from day to day, he was told) so as to get their legs used to the idea that their mind had accepted already, for they never gave a child a brace for their leg if they did not ask for it, and they never forced them to wear it if they did not want to. The social norm, however, was that one learned to walk that way in common locomotion, from place to place.

There was a story they told, about how one of their ancestors came to the island of Kailash in a rowing boat (which they had many of in order to skirt around the borders of the island and fish and enjoy themselves in, but none nearly big enough to make any sort of voyage to the crew's homeland). He was rowing, they said, in a boat big enough for his wife and his child and food enough for them to each for two months. He had set off from his old land, because it was unpalatable to him, for the ruler there had become corrupted with power and would soon take everything he had in the world from him — namely, his family. Not willing to give them up ("As though they were his," some Kailashian philosophers later commented) he had set off to find an island somewhere, away from stupid power and coarse, selfish

leadership where he and his family could live peacefully and with little want. He rowed and rowed, straight into the sea, keeping his direction by the sun by day, rowing into it in the morning and away from it in the evening, and by the stars by night, rowing always so that the bright star at the tip of the ladle shape of stars which he had been taught to recognize was always on his left side. He rowed for days and nights, everyday, while his wife tended to their child, and tried to calm him when he was crying and make him happy when he was sad. For two months he rowed, and no land was anywhere in sight in any direction. After two months, one day while he was rowing, a shark or some other similarly vicious creature swam up to below his row boat and grabbed one of his oars out of his hand, dragging it down to the depths of the sea — and so, him being very tired and not quite in his right mind (his wife was neither, and his son would have picked up their habits of manner before long), and because the days and nights became increasingly cloudy, to the point where he could no longer see either the sun or stars, he rowed still the same as he had before, making all the same motions with his body that he had before, only now with only a single paddle in his hand. He no longer paid attention to the sun or stars, and rowed only to continue onward, to move somewhere. He paddled like this for two days, and went around in twelve big circles in the ocean, but ended up no great distance farther along than he had been where he began, and in much the same spot as he had been in when the shark had taken his paddle.

However, it is said that God took pity on him, for a storm brewed up in that very spot, and he was soaked to the skin and tossed about, and his child and wife too, but the boat was not tipped, nor were they drowned, which was a miracle. While the wind blew and the rain drops fell, they could see nothing around them, but when the rain stopped and the storm lifted (and it seemed like an eternity before the rain stopped and the storm lifted), there was before him, in the center of the circle that he had been circumscribing in the

ocean by going around in his row boat, an island where there had been none before. And when he saw the island, it is said, his wits returned and he rowed for it, half of his strokes on one side, half on the other, having now a purpose and goal, an aim, a refuge for him and his loved ones — food and shelter for them, since he had run out of food and the boat provided practically no shelter whatsoever for them. He went ashore, and kissed it, and remembered his folly. And when he told this story to his son (for his son was not old enough to remember it at the time), he found pleasure in imitating the oars which his father had used with his legs, only the one holding an oar and the other not, so that he would keep always one leg straight and one leg able to bend, and it became a habit with him. His younger siblings soon took up the practice, and, when he took over the tribe (for he was oldest), he requested that all others walk in that way in his presence (he was very conceited). Other chiefs took less pains enforcing it, until it was no longer enforced officially at all, but the practice was still there, because the story was still there, and the Kailashians wished to honor their great and mighty ancestor who paddled for two months, nearly without ceasing, and survived a storm at sea in a row boat in order to found their island village. One leg straight, then, they always kept, and the other leg not so, and sometimes, at festivals, when they were having a good time, they would walk this way in an exaggerated fashion in circles around the fire pit at the center of the village, with the straight leg being the one outside the circle, sometimes swinging it around extra in their gaiety, to imitate their founder and original ancestor, from whom they were all descended, although he was only human. The children, then, would only ever be told the story, and always were given the choice to walk like their fathers and mothers did — but the peculiar thing (although it was not so peculiar to some) was that they always walked like their elders, although there were some notable exceptions, and those often ended up being stupid or lazy and were most likely to become

criminals (they were the same type of person, sociologists said, those who walked with a normal gait and those who committed crimes and starved to death). No formal sanction was put on walking like they did, and no laws or written or acknowledged customs existed pertaining to it, yet people did it, and, though nobody in the tribe itself questioned or was the least bit confused by it, the entire crew of The Goldfish (including Captain Ross) was utterly puzzled as to why so many people would be convinced to carry out so unnatural a function because of the effect a story, or even informal exposure might have on them. Kavi and the other elders of the Kailashians could not explain it entirely to their liking, and they puzzled over it until long after they left.

The crew of The Goldfish stayed on Kailash for over seven years, during which time they learned much about the cultural aspects and traditions of the Kailashians, and about broader philosophy and life in general, and about biology which was so general, comprehensive, and expansive, that they could be sure to use it anywhere else they went in the world. Captain Ross filled the pages of two books on observations and events that he deemed worthy of report, and Kavi made him a present of a few books of his own, written in Kailash's native language, for him to read for his own personal enjoyment. They were mostly about physics and philosophy, for the two, in Kavi's mind, were inextricably intertwined, and you could never have one in any real depth without the other. They collected knowledge of specimens unknown in their homeland and kept the ship well groomed and free from mold and things. They kept themselves well fed and taken care of, and some of them even had forgotten what they had set out to do at the start of their voyage, but for others homesickness reminded them, and for still others the call away from staying always in the same place, moving but not really going anywhere, as though they were moving in circles about the island — eating, working, and sleeping, but never moving when they worked.

Some others thought of leaving but were loathe to, and these were mainly the captain and the first mate, whose name was Ethan, both of whom loved the way in which the tribes people reached more correct conclusions than others from their own home towns had in years of study in a single month of research or thought and talking with other members on the matter. They were both very loathe to leave indeed, but Captain Ross knew that he had traveled not to find a better place to live, for he enjoyed living in his home on the mainland, but to explore new places so that future generations could know what was out beyond where their own eyes would see, or their own ears would hear, or their own skin feel. This was why he had come out here, and so, when he felt the time had come, he told Ethan and then Kavi, and both were very sad to hear it, but they all knew that it was best, and that they could not stay forever.

One of the crew members, however, had taken a wife from among the Kailashians, and she was loathe to leave her family, and he had no strong desire to leave with his fellow explorers if his wife would not come with him. He decided, then, to stay, and gave an extremely generous gift to the Goldfish as a parting present, a certain number of crates of a certain food which I will not describe here, but which was particular to the island — also some seeds which he collected he gave to the captain, so that when they returned home, they could plant and nurture this new species into the ecology of their father land, and therefore enrich it. Ross thanked him for the gift, for although he did not like to lose a crew mate, he hated even more to lose a friend or even to have one of his crew members pining away after a lost lover or to have a woman on board who did nothing but pine away after her lost family. He, then, knowing that he would do no pining, left the crew member to his wife and did not beg, not wishing to be like the cowardly condemned criminals, and knowing that the loss of a single crew member was a far cry from the loss of life and breath.

Kavi was sad to see them go, and he ordered them to attend a festival in their honor. The festival went for fourteen days, and Ross and the crew were much overwhelmed, for, although the standard festival length on Kailash was fourteen days, one had never been thrown in their honor before, and they were very surprised to have someone celebrating their great deeds (or something like that, they imagined) before they even had completed most of them. After the festival, each of the crew members made speeches, which were beautiful, and The Goldfish was loaded with food and water and supplies for a three month's journey. Having put everything in order, the crew was ready to take off, and bid the Kailashians and their lingering cremate goodbye. Just as the captain was on the boat still overseeing things just before their final departure, Kavi walked onto the boat, took him by the shoulder, and said these words to him:

"Remember, my friend, always remember: look at things for what they are. See things for what they are for. Never be deceived, in the world out there. Always remember. You are my friend. Do not be deceived, my friend."

Then they shook hands in the manner of Ross's homeland, and each laid their chin on the other's shoulder in the manner of Kavi's, and then they nodded to each other (Ross said "Thank you") and parted ways, Kavi climbing off the ship on which Ross had set off to sail the seas and explore new worlds. The tribe members helped push "The Goldfish" out to sea, and the sails were raised and wind sent into them. The boat was pushed due east again, straight away from the island of Kailash, and the navigational and map making tools were brought out once more, to chart the uncharted seas upon which they were sailing once again.

The seeds and animals from Kailash were all below deck, and the animals had food enough packed to last as long as the crew's food would. All the crew members were bustling about the deck, like men who, having worked inside for too long, years perhaps, were coming outside at long last to do

manual labor, or like butterflies who, because of a long period of dormancy, had turned back into caterpillars, and were now turning back into butterflies again, and they were unused to it mostly, although most recalled how to do things aboard a ship — such as walking or drinking or rigging up the main stay or excreting waste — with little difficulty, and they all were back into their sailors bodies before a week had passed.

They sailed for a month due east, and kept a sharp lookout from the crow's nest at all hours of the day, taking shifts through the night so that no parcel of land whatsoever might be missed. They lived light, trying to conserve food and supplies, knowing that they would need to stop at Kailash on the way back to the mainland for supplies, no matter how far out they went. They sailed for another month with no sight of land. Then, on the first day of the new month, the crow's nest spotted a small island directly south from them, which they had almost past in the night, but which the morning light shone on with promise, so that the Goldfish was turned and they sailed due south from their position, always keeping careful coordinates and logging all their motion. The island was smaller than they thought, and they reached it in less than the full day. They anchored offshore and sent in some boats to explore the place, for, indeed, it was hardly more than a rock or sandy reef in the middle of the vast ocean, unlike anything they had ever seen before this far out from the main shore, but, still, many men wished to explore it, so they all came in boats to the island, to see what there was to see there.

On the island were three trees, each of which were, upon further inspection, not living, and none of them had any leaves on them. The three trees were arranged in a triangle (who ever saw three trees that weren't?) and in the center of them there was a rock that looked almost as though it had been placed there after the island had been formed, since the ground under and around it for a couple feet was perfectly flat. They tried moving it, every man pushing as hard as he could, but they could do nothing.

Someone saw something scratched in the ground at their feet as they were pushing, and called everyone to look at it. Ross pushed his way to the front. It was several markings, which looked, when taken together, like a map of sorts, of the island, was his first guess. There were three hollow circles, and one in between them which was filled in. Two jagged lines slanted away from and underneath (away from the rock) the three circles, not quite meeting at the imaginary vertex that they would have met at if they had been continued an extra inch or so. At the vertex, there was a tiny x, almost no wider than the amplitude of the jaggedness of the lines, but distinctly two straight scratch marks crossing each other at a section.

Captain Ross looked at the places on the island that the jagged lines would have corresponded to. There was sand and silt covering the island there, and, there being no other part of the map but the lines and the x, him and the crew began to dig away the sand, some throwing it into piles near the trees and some throwing it into the sea, where most of them figured it had come from to begin with. The sand was deep — about 15 inches down — and it took them a very long time to clear the entire beach. But, 15 inches down, there was solid, smooth rock ground there, and, corresponding, as they had suspected, with the lines on the map, there were lines of script which none of them could rightly understand. And, at the point where the one line ended and the other began (they could not tell which was which, and it was very possible that they both ended or began there, at the center), there was a sort of button raised a bit, with more of the same script carved in relief onto it. A few of them tried to press it, but it was stuck, and they were rather scared that they would break it, or something else connected to it, and so nothing more was done with it until Ross came over to examine it (he had working in another part of the beach). He had been writing down the script as it was uncovered in a book that he had brought with, copying it carefully with ink onto paper so that they would have a portable copy with

them, and now the first thing he did with the button was copy down the script on top of it. Then, trying to press it again, he found that it was stuck, and pried some grains of sand out from around the edges, from the crack between the button and the rest of the flat, stone floor, since they were not quite flush with each other.

Once the grains of sand were out, he pressed it again, harder, putting a fair amount of his body weight onto it, most of his body weight, in fact, before it pressed down, like a button is meant to. They waited a few seconds, then they all began to hear and feel movements below the ground, under the island. It sounded and felt very much like giant stones moving about, grinding against each other. For several minutes, they listened to this sound. They stayed on the island, some walked around, some put their ears to the ground, no one really knowing exactly where the sound was coming from or what exactly it meant for them. The second mate had looked about for half a minute and, thinking that that was plenty enough of looking, sat down between the trees and leaned against the rock. He leaned his head back and looked at the sky and closed his eyes while the vibrations from below reached the top surface of the island. He was tired, and the sun was out.

Suddenly, the rock began to move steadily and with no small speed away from him, and he, startled, leapt to his feet and away from the rock, as though the thing had bit him, or become suddenly very hot or on fire or something. He shook his hand like it had been burned, and looked at the moving stone like it had done him some personal injury. The whole crew was looking on as a hole was exposed under where the stone had been, and Captain Ross was, of course, the first one there, peering down into the hole, calling for a rope and a torch and making one of the crew go back to the ship for the longest rope they had. He carefully revised his copies of the script to make sure it was as accurate as it could possibly be, and his records of the position of the island in relation to the wider sea. He waited impatiently for

the rope and torch, and, when it had got there, tied one end securely about one of the trees, with a sailor's knot or two or three. The end was then lowered into the hole, through which could be seen a cavern of sorts, although nearly all the details of the cave were hidden from their view, being obscured by the darkness. A small stone was dropped into the hole to hear what happened to it, and it fell for about four seconds before it hit a hard, probably rock or marble surface and bounced a few times, coming to a halt very soon after hitting rock bottom, telling them that it was on a flat surface that it had bounced, and that it would not be going any farther down than it had already and, therefore, neither would they. He grasped hold of the rope and, securing his book to his person, lowered himself into the hole. He said he would find out if it was safe or not, and then call up to someone to follow him, naming his preference for who it should be that follows him close after, and then he was gone from their sight mostly, except for a shrinking black shadow thing, which is the opposite of a silhouette, because a silhouette has always the light behind it, while in this one there was no light behind him at all, but only just enough light reflecting off the sides of the cavern and coming in from the top of the cave (it was late in the day, so the sun was low, and the angle the light was coming into the hole was therefore low too) only just enough light that they were able to see his shape in the darkness — so it wasn't a shadow, but a figure illuminated by just enough light for their eyes to perceive.

He reached the bottom of the cavern in a few minutes, and when he had got there, he called up to send down the torch. The rope was pulled up, and Ross stood in the dark, waiting while the torch was tied around with the rope and sent down into the abyss. He watched as the light was slowly lowered to him, descending slowly toward him, illuminating more and more of the cavern as it descended. It looked as though it had been cut by human hands, or chisels rather, and perhaps careful explosives. He took the torch

from the rope and looked about, examining the floor and looking for exits. He heard one of his crew members coming down the rope. There were no other exits to be found. Someone was standing on the ground next to him. They both looked around.

The cave was squarish, or like a box — the walls were flat, more or less, and there was a script similar to the other ones that were above ground, written along the walls of the cave, wrapping around the room, one line. The other crew member looked about, tapping on the walls and the floor, tapping and beating on the stone (some of the stone needed to be beat on to hear anything) in order to determine whether there was any empty space behind them. Satisfied (or frustrated — they both come from the same results for different people), he stood next to Ross again.

“Hold this,” Captain Ross said to his crew member, handing him the torch.

With two free hands, Captain Ross copied down the script around the walls as well. He could not understand a word of it, and his recognition of the actual letters themselves was weak. In fact, all were foreign to him except a few, which looked vaguely like some of the letters he had learned at Kailash. There were spaces and lines and dots that could be punctuation, but other than that he had no idea what any of it said. They looked over the cave one last time, and some people called down to make sure they were okay, and they responded that they were. The floor was almost completely even and bare, except for the stone that they had dropped, and except for a small stone tablet in the very corner of one of the corners, pushed up flush against two of the walls. Ross picked it up and put it in his bag, the one that held his book and ink and pen. After about an hour down in the cave, he went back to the rope and called up, that he was going to tie the torch to the rope, and that, when they felt three tugs on it, to pull it up, all of them, since both he and the other crewman would be coming up with it. He tied the torch,

himself, and his crewmen to the rope, then held on with both hands, as for dear life. He pulled on the rope quickly, three times, and seconds later it began to go up, with the three of them in tow: him, his crewman, and the light, burning still, just above their faces and, thankfully for their faces, just out of reach.

When he reached the top, he told them (they were asking questions right away) that the cave was empty, and that there was writing on the walls — and that he believed the answer to whatever the purpose of the island was was in the message somehow, and that he would figure out what it said. He told them not to worry, that he would find out what it said, and that he could decipher the script and figure out what it meant. He ordered them to take him to his quarters on the ship, so that he could work out the problem, which would take a few days, he thought. Half of them went back to the ship, and half stayed there to look about. Some went down into the cave as well, and they all tapped and prodded and looked about — and some examined the trees and found nothing there — and some looked at the rock, and some dove around the edge — but there was nothing they could find. The captain, meanwhile, poured over the images written in his book from within his cabin, pacing about, opening the window to let the light in, and talking to no one. The first mate took control of the other parts of running a ship, and was generally in charge, as someone has to be in most situations, and would regularly ask Ross if he needed anything. Ross would always answer that there was nothing, and ask how the rest of the crew was doing — Ethan would reply that they were all doing fine, and Ross would say:

"Carry on with your work."

And that would be it. For several days this went on like this. The captain would talk to no one except Ethan, and the crew lazed about, more or less, eating and drinking and exploring the island, but not able to go anywhere by order of the captain. Ethan tried to limit the food consumption to as little

as possible, and it was comparatively limited (that is, in comparison to the rest of the journey), but still, they were wasting good food, and they had gone no farther into the deep blue sea during that time. The Captain kept working away, hunched over his desk, pacing, muttering to himself, reading out of books, both in Kailashian and his own native language. He worked for entire days in his cabin, alone.

A week after they had landed, he called Ethan into his quarters.

"Tell them to weigh anchor and take a course due east from here. Now. Get them all on the ship and leave as soon as possible," he said.

Ethan called them together and told them to weigh anchor and take off right away, due east again — and everyone wanted to know what was going on, and why they were taking off just now, and Ethan said that those were captain's orders, and to do them — and everyone bustled about doing their thing, and then Ethan went below to ask the captain what he had found and why they were heading off in so abrupt a manner.

"I'll tell you later," was his only reply. "Don't ask; I'll tell you."

He didn't mention it for a few days. Then he called Ethan into his quarters again.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier," Ross said. "I just wanted some time to revise it..." He handed Ethan an envelope. "Open this if you must head back to the mainland without me," he said. "You cannot know what it says before that, or if I am still alive and with you when you come back. Only open this if I am not with you when you return... Keep it safe. It's not terribly important, really..." he trailed off for less time than it will take you to read the rest of this sentence. "I just want you," he continued, "to have it, in case you want what's inside, you know. So you have a choice if I'm not here. If I'm here, I'll make the choice of course... but just in case..."

Ethan understood. It was a dangerous job being the captain of an exploration expedition. All of them were in dangerous positions. All of them,

really; they were almost four months away from home now, by boat (which was the only way they knew how to get home from ˛ here, and probably the fastest available), and they still had no idea what was ahead of them (not that they ever would, if they kept going on like this). The water seemed thinner and thinner everyday, as though it was easier to sail farther away once you were already away, as though it was sucking them out to see, farther and farther, and them not able to do anything about it but turn the boat around (and the captain would have to do that, or mutiny, which none of them would ever dream of doing now — well, some dabbled, I suppose, in such dreams, but nothing of meaning, really, nothing they would ever do). They continued to sail, out into the open, into the unknown.

After a time, they came across another island, the fourth they'd seen so far. Four months sailing, and only four islands, two of which had been completely uninhabited. This one did not look uninhabited. Strange looking boats were pulled up onto the sand, across the sand, and to the edge of the dense forest that covered the center of this island. They pulled their boats onto the shore and cautiously got out. The second mate got suddenly sick to his stomach, and threw up a little bit, but he swallowed it down so that no one would know that he was squeamish. They all walked into the forest, carefully and as quietly as possible. Only five men were here — four had stayed back on The Goldfish, at the captain's orders, to keep their precious cargo safe.

Captain Ross and the four men with him (the second mate being one of them) crept through the forest silently, torn between looking friendly and peaceable and being on guard and alert. Most of the men tried to conjure up something that was halfway in between, but mixing things like expressions (and if you have tried it you can concur) very often leaves the mixer paralyzed, or at least more so, since his brain is occupied with the mixing and his body is being tugged in all different directions (torn to pieces, some say)

by the brain. Basically, they all were trying to prepare both for a friendly but suspicious and for an altogether unfriendly tribe, but they had lost as soon as they had set foot in the forest, for then they were on the inhabitants' territory, the place where they were most comfortable hiding behind bushes, behind trees and under logs and things, and, even had they stayed out on the beach, five men have never, historically speaking, been any sort of match for fifty angry natives, especially if they pick such a poor location to be attacked and wear such bright clothing (at least, compared to the leaves and bark around them).

A few of them stepped on leaves and twigs, each of which makes loud noises when you step on them. The air was hot, and the sun came through the trees in strips like snakes, slithering across the foliage on the forest floor. Captain Ross had no way of making his crew any more quiet, nor did he know if it would make any difference. If the inhabitants were unfriendly, it wouldn't matter whether they approached them loudly or quietly — however they approached them, as soon as they found out that they were there, they would be sure to attack, and attack was something they couldn't quite defend against, couldn't quite prepare for, because they had spirit and no strength.

At once, as you and I suspected they probably would, the inhabitants of the island jumped out from behind the trees and yelled and whooped and howled and hollered and screeched and made all sorts of other funny noises with their throats and skin, and sorts of instruments (drums all, really) that some had brought with them for the occasion. The crew of the Goldfish all bravely brandished their weapons (mostly just knives — one of them had tied theirs to the end of a stick and was prodding at the air with it), but they were surrounded by over ten times their own number. They couldn't fight their way out, they discovered now, and so they all set down their weapons (the one with the stick-knife set his down last; he was very proud of it) and

allowed themselves to be taken away.

They were dragged through the forest into the waiting village which was arranged, at first glance, very much like the village on Kailash, with a big fire pit in the middle of the buildings, which were made out of mud and sticks, and the people there were very excited to see visitors. The chief (a big man with a big neck) looked incredulously at them, a facial expression which here clearly meant, “I have no idea where you have come from, or why, or HOW!!? What do you want from me?? Are you gods?? We should kill you, but what if you are gods? What if only one of you is, and not the others??? Will I be deceived? Will you deceive me? How can I know what to do, when I expect that you will not understand what I say? How come your boat is so big? Where have you come from? WHERE?!?!?”

He tried some exuberantly emphatic sign language, but nothing seemed to avail him much more, as the crew and captain of the Goldfish understood already that he was angry, and confused, and frustrated with them being there. Captain Ross, in an attempt to alleviate some stress that he may have felt (it was evident that he was feeling a lot — this expression is a euphemism) and made calm, sweeping motions with his hands as he explained, first in his native language, then in Kailashian (he was hoping that they might recognize some of the words — they didn’t) where he had come from, and what his mission was (to explore uncharted lands), and how he had come to find their humble island, and how highly he thought of it.

It didn’t work quite as well as he thought, for the people thought that he moved so comfortably and calmly in the face of death (which he had) that he must be a god (which he wasn’t), and his companions must be his friends, friends of a god. They dropped their weapons and flocked about him. They practically speaking prevented him from leaving, and the crew as well, and they all hustled the five of them into very special tents, and they slept there for the night, bored and worried.

“I will contact you after a few days, I promise,” Ross had told Ethan before he had left. “After seven days passes, if I am not with you, and you have seen no sight of me, and believe me to be dead, or know me to be dead, leave immediately, so that they do not creep up on the ship in the middle of the night with their boats and take you hostage. In fact, have a nighttime guard, and a 24 hour watch on the island, if you can manage it. I should hate to have any harm come to you, Ethan.”

The next few days Ross and the crew were kept captive, passively going along with the celebrations and things. They understood that they were loved, but they could not figure out whether the love was the kind that good friends got, the kind gods receive, or the kind one has for pizza or tomatoes. Sacrifices, Ross knew, had just as much fuss made over them, some more, and they would have been terribly happy to have no fuss made over them at all and be still alive. Most of them, anyway. Regardless, the morning of each day brought a new sense of time running out to him, since in seven days The Goldfish would, very likely, leave, and then they would have no way whatsoever to get back to their homeland, much less off the island, which seemed to be more and more desirable each day. They treated their bodies with every good thing, yet they all were terribly uncomfortable.

On the night before the fifth day, Ross said to them:

“I have a plan. We must escape and communicate with Ethan and The Goldfish. They are likely to try to honor one or more of us again, you see, as they have been doing as of late. The next time this happens, I will let them know that I wish to be honored alone — and then I will make some sort of big show to impress and distract them. When you see me do this, run, run as if your life depended on it, but quietly. Sneakily, down, back to the shore, beat them there. I will sneak away once they turn to look at you and in the midst of the confusion you cause, and I will meet up with you later. They will be pulled in different directions, both their hearts and minds, for they will not

know either which choice is safer or smarter nor which one they really want, if I have understood them right at all. Now, tomorrow, do not forget our plan, or else I will have planned this all for naught."

They listened to his plan, purposing in their hearts to obey, which was best. For it is a terrible idea to ever disobey those who are in authority over you in order to benefit them, for then they do not get the credit for the good thing done, since they had no part in it, and you do not get credit for obeying them, since you didn't. However, they did, and the next day when the tribe came around them in full force to shower them with food and presents as they had been doing, Captain Ross raised his hand abruptly, his head turned down and slightly to the side, with one ear up in the air and one ear down, as though he was listening for something very quiet. Then he walked, forward, with his hand still in the air, as though he were looking. The tribe stood stock still, waiting with baited breath. Suddenly, Ross stopped. He smoothly (not slowly, exactly) lifted his head and lowered his hand, and stretched his arms out to the side, like you might see someone do who has been waiting for a rain for a long time and, when it finally comes, stands under the torrent of drops and is soaked. He dropped his arms to climb (leap, really) atop a nearby rock, which was huge and tall (the lowest part came up to his waist), only to spread his arms and look at the sky again. The tribe crowded around him to see what he would do, obviously amazed by the show and exceedingly curious as to what he would now do.

Ross lowered his head, then began chanting something in a tongue none of the people in the tribe had ever heard before. It was not his native language either — it was Kailashian, and, translated, it sounded like this:

"Run, run, run
Silently, run away
Run to there, there the beach
There run, run

Ruuuuuuun."

It was much prettier in Kailashian, with a few rhymes and a much better pattern, and some word play even. English does not do the passage justice. He did make it up on the spot, in truth, but, nevertheless, it was good, and the message came across clear to those who understood it.

They had begun moving at the last "run," which he had held out for a very long time. They went quietly, and no one saw them at all, for they were till back at their tent and he was on the rock, stomping and making such a ruckus with his howls that no one could have heard the leaves beneath the men's feet if they tried. They didn't try, however, and Captain Ross continued to make up verse to go along with his crazed stompings:

"Deceived, be deceived you
You people who keep us and possess
And trying, try to take our
Freeeeeedooooooom!!!"

At "freedom," also, he hollered and made a funny sound with his voice that he had heard them make at occasion, when they were very happy; and the whole tribe, practically, began to make it with him, and most of them (except the very old or with child) began to jump up and down. "This is ridiculous," Ross thought to himself. "They'll kill me if they find out what I've done." He knelt now, and, putting both his hands in front of him, flat upon the rock, bowing his head and closing his eyes, he began to chant again, this time putting more song into the words than he had before:

"What I am, you do not know:
You do not knoooow me!
My companions have gone
Now and you are watching
Me.
Me, me here,

Watching me, climb to me."

And the word for "here" in Kailashian sounds very much like a word that means "climb to," and so the last one could have very easily been either one or the other, or both, if you like the sort of thing that has two, perfectly good meaning in a single moment. Some other things, you see, have one meaning if you took it one way and another meaning if you took it another, but very few things can have two perfectly good meanings that work whether you take it one way or another, and I think that this was one of those such things. But I may be wrong. I never learned Kailashian that well — only well enough to do rough translations.

As he ended this last segment of verse, he stretched out his arms, hands still on the surface of the rock, and bent his body down deeper. He rested like this for a short time, then rose his body up again, pushing off with his hands and standing, head down, his body becoming straight once more, his head coming up last of all, bent slightly backwards and looking just a few degrees above the horizon.

Then sat down on the far edge of the rock, away from them, facing away from them, listening carefully with both ears, his mind's ears pointed backward at the tribespeople, listening carefully to their emotions, waiting for the surprise of finding his companions to be gone. It was not long to the shore. Perhaps he could hold their attention a bit longer. He tried to look deep in thought — he thought he looked deep in thought. He stood up on the other side of the rock and turned to face them, his face as profound and divine as he could manage.

Meanwhile, his crew had made it down to the beach. They had broken into a run once the village was no longer in sight, because they had been too frightened to do so before. Their boats were gone (some thought they might be, but no one had considered the possibility, no one had dared, because of what it meant about the intentions of the tribe, especially since they had

neither been told about their boats being moved nor been shown the boats themselves, at the village or something. They waved the watch on the Goldfish down, and dove into the water immediately and began swimming out to it. Someone lowered the last boat remaining on the ship (it was usually saved for emergencies) into the water and began rowing out to collect the floundering sailors. The second they were on the boat, Ethan asked them where Captain Ross was. They told him about the plan, and how they had escaped, and that he would come later ("—or not at all," someone mumbled), and then they began to tell the other three sailors the story of their days there.

Ethan stood on the prow of the ship looking out over the water to the island and said a little prayer.

Ross had turned to face the tribe, and began dancing in place, a crazy dance. Every once in a while, he would look up and over the natives' heads, and after a few minutes of his glancing, they turned to look themselves, to see what he was looking at. It was only then that someone realized that the rest of their prisoners were gone. They realized it, and went certifiably nuts, running everywhere looking for them, spreading out in search parties. He waited until everyone was looking the other way, then ran in the opposite direction. It took much less time for someone to spot him than it had for his companions to be spotted. They began running after him, shouting and, at this point, very angry. But he was not running away. Not running anymore, anyway. He took a step or two in a turn to the right and, launching himself off of his right foot as far as he could, leapt through the air, off a cliff, into the open air, with nothing below him but space and sea. The sea was almost a hundred yards down, and he hoped that there were no rocks underneath the surface. He hit the water, sunk, hit bottom, pushed off, came up gasping and swimming for the front of the island. He only had to get around a curve a couple hundred yards away, and then he would be in sight of The Goldfish.

They could come pick him up, he would go home. Or farther east. He didn't know what drove him east, anyways. Why would he need to go east? He kept swimming westward, towards his ship.

Many people had been following him however; many people had jumped and were in the water behind him, splashing, coming up for breath, swimming after him like sharks (if you can imagine a shark in human form). They were not so many yards behind him — twenty, maybe — and he doubted that he could last forever. He searched inside of himself for the strength he needed, and surged forward, possibly faster than he had been swimming before, but nevertheless with all his heart. With all his power. With all his might.

He swam mostly with his legs, frantically with his arms, breathing like a practiced singer, in and out at all the right times. They swam better. He swam one hundred yards — they swam one hundred and ten. They were catching up, and he knew it.

Just as he reached the bend, where he could see his ship around the corner, The Goldfish, waiting, with his crew just having climbed on board (though he wasn't sure of that at the time), they caught him. One grabbed his leg, another one pushed down on his back; he went under, but he kicked the one in the face and swam deeper and farther away, planning to surface farther along while they waited back there, splashing their hands around in the water looking for him. But they had dove under as well and were coming up behind him — he glanced behind because he had felt the water current moved unnaturally around him, and then he saw them, moving like snakes through the water, their arms and legs barely coming away from their body at all, wiggling back and forth and propelling themselves forward. They caught him underwater, and he fought, but they dragged him up and hit him over the head with a log, and he started bleeding and was fading out of consciousness, and they dragged him to the shore and back to the village, where the chief and most of the natives were waiting. The chief was very

angry.

He hit Ross across the face. Ross fell to his knees; he was weak.

“Sing!” he said with his hands, making gestures like music coming out of his own mouth, then out of Ross’s. He smacked Ross’s throat and moved his mouth up and down. He stepped back and motioned for him to begin.

Ross stared at him, and then at the ground, and did nothing.

“Dance!” the chief said with his body. He moved about as much like Ross had done as he himself could do without losing too much of his own dignity. He pushed the air upward from his waist with both hands (to say “Get up!”) and slapped his legs, grabbed his thighs, pulled them, pushed them. He hit Ross in the belly button, hard, and not at all friendly. He stepped back and waited.

Ross stared at the ground in front of him. He lowered his eyes. He was surrounded by natives, natives angry at him for not pleasing them. He still did nothing.

The chief was enraged. He stomped over to a nearby warrior (much like a young child does, Ross observed, but without the picking up of the feet so much) and snatched his spear out of his hands. He walked back over to Ross. He hit him in the groin with the blunt part of the spear. Ross grimaced. He stopped himself from protecting or covering his groin with his hands. It would show weakness.

The chief hit him in the face with the blunt end. He hit him over the head with the flat of the sharp end. He hit the broad side of the stick against his eyes. He screamed at him. He motioned wildly with his hands and mouth and feet. Ross did not move. He was thinking about the first island they had visited. About the heat inside the volcano. About how good it felt to come out again.

The chief kicked him in the face. Blood started running out of his nose. The chief’s own face scrunched up in fury, the veins on his skull popping out

in every direction. He grasped the spear with both his hands and drove it into Ross's abdomen. The point found its way in between his side and his belly button.

The pain shot through his body like a ship before smooth waters with the wind at her back. He cried out. He howled. He cried out to let out the pain and frustration, the anguish of his three day captivity. He called out to let his friends know that they could leave now. They were free now, as they had been before.

Ethan heard the cry, and knew what it meant: that their leader was now no longer alive. His spirits were lowered, but his head he kept raised towards the island. He stoically raised his hand to his head in a sort of salute, the kind they had used in their homeland. Some of the sailors had heard the sound, and they were fearful in their hearts, but it took many of them several minutes of thought to realize what it meant.

"Hoist the sails!" Ethan shouted. "Weigh the anchor. We're going home."

They followed his commands. Those that remembered what they would be leaving behind if they left without their captain were those that had heard and understood what had become of him. One or two confused sailors asked crewmates close at hand, and they were told why they were all leaving. A course was set due west, and Ethan took charge as captain of the boat. Captain Ross had not had his books with him when he died. He had given them to one of the four men that had been with him the night before. The man gave it to Ethan now, and Ethan took the captain's quarters, solemnly and with a sense of awe and respect that was natural to an officer assuming the role of acting on behalf of his commander.

The next day, he remembered the envelope. He took it out of his desk drawer and opened it gingerly. Inside was a letter from the captain and a piece of paper from his notebook. The letter went like this:

Dear Ethan,

I'm sorry to have left you, in whatever fashion I have, and I trust that you shall take fine care of The Goldfish and its crew, perhaps better care than I have taken these years that we have been together. I wish you the best of luck on your journey home, and go there straightaway, so that our cargo may reach those for whom it was intended as soon as possible — the people and scholars of our homeland. They, naturally, and future generations are the recipients of our benefaction, of the knowledge we obtained from Kailash and of the locations of the various islands we have been to. This is all good, and I am proud to have accomplished it with you by my side. You could not have been a finer first mate than you have been.

Now concerning the island, with the rock and the three trees. Surely you remember it. I left immediately because I did not want the crew to discover what was in it, for if they had, we would have never been able to move on. I will tell you now, in this letter, and you may decide, using your own best judgment, whether or not you should retrieve it. I can hardly make the decision now that I am not with you.

I deciphered the lettering inside the cave and outside. The translations are on the sheet of my notebook paper I have placed in the envelope with this letter. You have the rest of my notebook, so you can piece together how I got it, if you like. The basic idea is that there is gold in that island, or, if not gold, some great treasure worth a large fortune. The instructions for how to get it out are simple and enclosed, but you need more than one man (for position's sake) and I am not at all surprised that we did not find it when we were there. It involves pressing more

than one point of the wall at a time.

Regardless, you may chose now whether or not to go back and retrieve the gold. You may probably fit a good deal of it on board — I do not know exactly what amount is there to be had — but then you may not; it is something to consider. Whatever you find there, treat it wisely, and promise never to abuse wealth, if you should take it. If you do not, I do not blame you, and would count your decision wise, if I were there. You may choose for or against the gold. I have said too much now, and already am on my second sheet of paper, even though I used the back of the first. That is all I have to say. Pleasant voyage home, may your sails be filled with wind!

Sincerely,

Captain Ross Raskowitz

Ethan looked at the map and the drawings and the translations. The captain had done good work. He tipped his chair back on two legs and looked out the window. The sea moved along outside, ticking the hours until they arrived home. They would have to stop at Kailash first.

Ethan called up to the second mate. He said to set a course straight for Kailash, according to the maps the captain and he had drawn. The course was set, and no one was told about the treasure in the island.

The Goldfish never went back to recover it.

They went back to Kailash for food, which they traded for stories of their adventures since leaving (they weren't many, really, except for the last island — the second to last one was still a mystery to the other sailors). The wife of the crew member they had left behind was pregnant. Kavi was very sad to hear that Ross had died, and he cried and wailed a bit, but then contained himself and organized a formal funeral, after the style of the Kailash. And when they were finished, Ethan (who knew that they should not

wait so long as they had the first time they were here) thanked the Kailashians warmly and set off for home. It was a three month journey, and, when they had reached their homeland, there was a first an astonished “Who are you?” from everyone they met — and then they told them, and those who remembered cheered them, and those who didn’t oohed and ahhed at the exotic things they began to bring off of the boat. Plants and seeds and creatures, and, most importantly, maps and knowledge, in the hands of Ethan, the first mate.

The animals were left in the hands of the most careful and intelligent herders they knew, so that they could be raised carefully and in the right environment, and so that they could reproduce and thrive here in their new country. The seeds and plants were left in the care of an expert agriculturalist, who was told that they were foreign and extinct and that it would be nearly impossible to obtain another one.

The papers and maps and books and notes from Captain Ross’s observations (minus the treasure maps — those Ethan was sure to leave out) were delivered by Ethan in person to the finest institute he knew of on the mainland, a university run by a prestigious man named Fatimo. He promised to take good care of all the information and to make sure that publications were released regarding them, and Ethan volunteered his time to teach him Kailashian, since, though it would be possible with only the notes, it would be extremely difficult, and perhaps not fully complete. He added that he had lived with the native people for over seven years, and Fatimo accepted his offer immediately. They spent several months together, Fatimo learning to speak Greek, and doing well at it, and Ethan being a go ˇod teacher. After six months of lessons, Fatimo decided that he knew enough Kailashian to understand the translations and read the books, and said that he would find and send for Ethan when he needed him. Ethan thanked him very kindly (he had been fed and housed and paid a little for his services) and

went his way. He went home to his wife and family and made plans to give his sons an envelope with the maps to the treasure island and instructions for how to acquire the treasure on it. He put the sealed envelope in his will, so that he would get it if he died, although he expected to give it to him before then. He did not want the treasure, for he had done his part, and had his reward, and he needed nothing — and if his sons wanted the treasure, they could work hard for it, earn it, sail four months out to sea to get it if they wanted, and come back rich men. But he would not get it for them. He would no do their job for them. They could do it themselves, he said. They could do it. He sat down in a soft chair.

Fatimo, meanwhile, was publishing articles and stories and all sorts of things that pertained to the Kailashians, which was a subject of knowledge that he saw fit to personally oversee, since it was so exotic and foreign and new. He approved of nearly all of the Kailashian's scientific studies and conclusions — some of their explanations had been elaborated upon by their own. Their proofs that the earth was round, however, were intolerable to him, since he himself had published when he was just a young professor the definitive proof that the world was, indeed, flat, and it had remained uncontested for over twenty-five years. This part of their science, then, he stuffed away and hid, and did not publish — and all the subjects were published except for those pertaining to any sort of round earth, and people praised his writing and the crew and captain of The Goldfish's bravery (they had been given full credit by Fatimo in his writings), and the findings of Captain Ross and The Goldfish were published for the entire scientific community to read. The original documents were labeled and stored in the libraries and very few people read them — and those who did read them as one would the original manuscript of a book you had read the translation of and knew nothing about the original language that the book was written in. They would open it, glance in awe at the pictures, leaf through several pages,

stare at one in particular for a certain length of time as though they were particularly engrossed, then, slowly, as though reluctantly, close the book and look at the cover for a few seconds, hefting its weight in their hands. Then they would put it back on the shelf, and there it would stay for a long while.

One day, however, a young man named Toirdhealbhach — his parents called him Alby, and his friends didn't know his real name at all — discovered Kailashian; and he was enthralled by the story of the captain who had discovered the island, and even more enthralled by the tales of the island itself, and so he desired to learn absolutely everything that there was to be learned about it and about the things fro ˇm it and pertaining to it, and where it was and who lived there, and the language, especially the language. He spent hours pouring over Captain Ross's notes on the Kailashian language, comparing, writing on his own in the language, reading from the books Kavi had given them (Alby did not know Kavi's name). He devoured the volumes (figuratively speaking, of course) and loved every hour that he spent studying the subject. He adored the way of thinking of those from the island of Kailash, and their observations of the world and their laws and things that pertained to sciences of all kinds.

In his readings, he came across a thin book called "The Round Universe," roughly translated, and in it he found the Kailashian's proof that the earth, as he knew it, was round, and always had been, and always would be — and he read it, and he was confused at first, but then it began to make sense, that maybe the world was, in fact, round — such a truth was by no means impossible. He began to wonder why no one had ever seen this, and to search through the translated works, and the third party publications, all the things that Fatimo had written about the Kailashians. There was no mention of the round earth at all, as Alby imagined there could not have been, or else he would have surely remembered it — the prominently taught (assumed,

rather) shape of the top of the earth was flat, although it was still debated whether or not the bottom was also flat, whether it was a prism shape or had rounded edges, or whether it was like a part of a sphere that had been cut off by a flat plane (on which they were living now), or what the shape underneath was — only that it was deep enough to hold an ocean in most places, which was, his professor had decided, unfathomably deep, so much so that no one would ever be able to see the bottom of it. He himself wasn't quite sure that no one would ever see the bottom of it — it actually seemed rather plausible, if someone could hold their breath for long enough, or make a ship that had a top and a bottom — he had toyed with the latter idea a fair amount. But the round earth — like a ball, the Kailashians said, with people on both sides, and with down being the center of the ball rather than the bottom — it made sense, but yet it went against everything he had ever learned, all the way from his youth. His father had studied under Fatimo and graduated with his recommendation for the top honor of his class (he did not receive the honor, but only by a small number of votes from the administration, who gave out such honors).

He looked over the arguments for the ball-like earth one last time, then began to write a synopsis of them, planning to publish it as a new finding on his favorite subject. He worked for hours translating the words from Kailashian into his native language, which was much uglier and much more ungainly and unwieldy than Kailashian, and he translated certain parts word for word, and certain parts he translated in large, sweeping strokes, neverminding the specific words, but paying more attention to the argument itself, to the feeling of it coming off the paper and into his realm of understanding and, hopefully, off the pages of his report and into the reader's realm of understanding. The truth, he thought, was too important not to let others read it, and to make them learn Kailashian (a very difficult but more elegant language than his own) was too high a price, he thought, for

this knowledge, if they could get it another way. So he translated and wrote and labored.

And when he was finished, he brought the report to Fatimo, to have it reviewed before it was published, because all publications that came from the university needed to be reviewed by the headmaster, and, Fatimo being the headmaster, it was his job to review them before they were published. Alby was sure that such an exciting revelatory discovery would be received with praise and gratitude from the head of such a venerated old establishment as the university, but he had never heard anything about Fatimo's past, even his achievements or acclamations.

Fatimo looked at the report, and his face contorted, and his brow furrowed twice over as many times as it should have if he were merely puzzling over a difficult concept. His hands began to shake as he read it, and his temples felt as though they may explode at any moment — perhaps you have never felt such a feeling, but Fatimo did. When he was done reading it, he felt betrayed and smothered, as though he had been stabbed in the back and then covered in manure, although nothing even remote to this was intended by Alby. Only the highest of respect was exuded from Alby in Fatimo's general direction, and Fatimo could tell — he didn't know what to make of it all, the obvious potential death of his career in his hands, and the high regard for himself sitting in from of him. At the end of the paper, he forced a smile.

"This paper," he said, his voice quivering a little — he paused a moment to calm it — and he smiled — "is ... wonderful. Astounding. I've never seen anything like it in my life. Never in my life... this must be published at once! I must send this to all my friends. Have you many copies already?"

"No, none," Alby replied, stunned to temporary stupidity by the overwhelming adoration from the headmaster — if he had been given a

simple math problem at that moment, he would have had no idea whatsoever what to do with it or how to handle it.

"I haven't hired any scribes, and this is the only copy I've written so far."

Fatimo's face turned from a pleased smile to an evil grimace, and he threw the manuscript into the fireplace, which was meant to warm the room during colder days. Alby cried out and leapt to his feet, and Fatimo held him back for a minute, escorting him out of his office with as much force as would overpower the shocked, mumbling and struggling student. A few professors had heard the boy cry out, and peeked out of their offices to see what was going on, but Fatimo waved them away, saying it was nothing, and that they shouldn't worry their heads about it.

Alby was still in an incredible state of shock when he was dropped outside and said goodbye to. His manuscript, the subject of his most devoted interest — and a very academic, intelligent, and thorough report on an important subject — had been burned on what seemed like the whim of a professor, the head of the school, who, of all people, should have been most overjoyed at seeing such enthusiastic work as his. He was utterly confused.

He went to the vice overseer, a bright man himself, and in no way inferior to the headmaster, except perhaps in political prowess, and asked him for advice on the matter. On hearing the whole story, the vice overseer sighed a sad sigh, and told Alby the story of Fatimo's past, how he had written the definitive work on the flat earth and the widely accepted proof of its existence, and how he was frightened above all else of being proven inadequate or wrong in something, since then he could not oversee the school maintaining half so much respect as he did now, especially among the elder professors. A paper like Alby suggested, he said, would ruin Fatimo. He congratulated him on the work, but conceded that, although Alby was right and the earth probably really was round (he had not seen the argument

himself, but he had always thought it possible that Fatimo could be wrong), regardless of all this, Fatimo would still get his way, since he had so many friends in the university, and no thesis contrary to his own would be published, no matter how he tried, and that the matter would best be left alone, and that he gave his deepest condolences and would personally oversee any field of study which he wanted to pursue except for that one.

Alby, however, determined that the truth should be gotten out into the open at any cost and for no reason other than that it was the truth, and also because he was still sore about having his manuscript burned, to put it lightly, brought the matter to the courts, accusing Fatimo of discriminatory behavior and malicious action in assault of the truth. The courts heard his case tentatively, for they were cautious about doing anything against Fatimo, and Fatimo told a story about how the boy came to him wanting to graduate from the institution without any remarkable work (which was a requirement) as a first year student, and how he had done nothing malicious and never seen the alleged report in his life. When asked what the report was about, Alby replied that it had been a proof on the roundness of the earth, of its ball-like shape, and that the proof had come from an exotic island called Kailash and was not his own, but he was laughed down, and told that it was common knowledge that the surface of the earth was flat, that it had already been proved, and that, since it was his word against Fatimo's, they would be forced to rule in favor of the elder, in his defense, and the case was dismissed like that, after the first trial.

It had caused enough of a stir, however, to give Fatimo cause enough to ban Alby from the ancient room of the library, saying that he was a troublemaker and could not be trusted with those old, priceless books that were the property of the establishment, and the librarians there were told to keep him out of it at all costs, and they always went over and locked the door to the basement (where the old books were kept) whenever he walked

into the library, since not too many people ever went downstairs to read the old books.

Alby decidedly dropped his other studies at the university, so distraught was he over the unjustice of the hiding of the truth about our world, our very world, the world we live in, and he became somewhat of a nuisance sometimes, coming into the library and sitting down next to or in front of the basement door, or trying to break the lock with his hands or with tools, while the librarians were sitting there watching him, no less.

One night, he attempted to break into the university and into the basement room, planning to steal the manuscript while everyone was asleep. Fatimo had his bedroom in the university (he lived there, really — he also had his own kitchen and living room) and, when he heard Alby pounding on the lock to the basement room, he woke up and, lighting a candle, went down the stairs to the first floor to see what all the fuss was about. He walked into the library with his light, and Alby stopped pounding. He turned and faced Fatimo with a look somewhat akin to the one a deer gives to a hunter right before the arrow is unleashed and, even if it is struck by the shot, it darts away. Fatimo took a step forward, and Alby jumped, rushing through the headmaster of the school to get to the exit (Fatimo fell nearly over — he was rather old), out the door, and into the street, causing a few mothers who had been nursing their restless children to look out the window with the racket he made knocking over a table that had been sitting outside, left over from the marketplace the day before.

The next day was a terrible one for Alby and a field day (figuratively speaking) for Fatimo. Fatimo brought Alby to the courts, accusing him of making an attempt on his life, from which he had survived and for the survival of which he thanked his lucky stars. Again, it was the headmaster's word versus Alby's, and Fatimo won again, especially since he had the witness of several mothers around the town who had seen him running out of

the university at a very late hour the night before. He was condemned in short notice, and Fatimo pushed for a punishment of exile, since he could not have the death of one he rightfully knew to be innocent of murder over his conscience (although he did not say the last part to anyone). The punishment was administered, and Alby was sent out into the country to live wherever he liked, so long as he did not come within the borders of the kingdom or any of its provinces.

Now the vice overseer was much younger than Fatimo, and so, when Fatimo died from old age and disease, mostly built up around the heart and lungs, and since most of his friends were gone by this time, the vice overseer became the new headmaster of the university and made sure to see the subject of Alby's work come to fruition, and that the round earth theory be published as soon as was humanly possible. He saw to the matter himself, conducting the research in person or making sure it was conducted only in his presence, under his supervision. The project was carried out with no obstructions, though it was considered in rather poor taste to ruin a professor's reputation after he was dead already, and Alby's discovery was published for the whole academic world to see and read. And then, the new headmaster thought that, perhaps, Alby may have been right after all.

Alby, however, was still banished. The kingdom was relatively small (compared to the other kingdoms surrounding it), and other kingdoms spoke his language, so he had no trouble finding himself a plot of land way out in the country, miles away from any cities or towns. He built himself a house about a mile from the water (he couldn't quite see the shore from his house, though he could see farther out, because there were so many rolling hills) and dug a well and grew a little garden out back for all his needs. For the rest of his food (for few men can live only on vegetables, even if it is incredibly healthy for you), he went down to the shore every day and went fishing, with both a net and a hook and line, ("For different days," he said), and caught

enough fish to eat for that day before returning to his home and sleeping in his bed. He found himself a wife, a pretty young thing who was very kind and known by everyone for miles around to be the sweetest girl for miles around. They had a few children together, and lived out their days there in the house, happy with each other and content with their lot in life.

Their children had children, and their children had children, and Alby's oldest son's oldest son, whose name was Jack, was unfortunate enough to marry an disagreeable woman who was pretty but rather a contentious sort who said that she would just as soon scream at you as bash your head in if she didn't get her way (he had never seen her ' do the latter). Because he was the oldest, he should have been given the family house, but his father (the oldest of his generation) lived on far too long for his taste, and so he moved down the coast about fifty or so miles, far enough so that he would not be near his family if anything happened to them, and so that it would be a terrible inconvenience to come visit him if ever they wanted to, for at that time he believed his wife to be sweet and loving, such was the aura they had put on before they had gotten married and shortly after as well. There he built a house very similar to his father's, with very much the same relation to the shore and the surrounding cities, and it was good.

Very soon after she began having children, however, his wife turned grumpy and unpleasant, and it was all that Jack could do to keep his temper sometimes, and he would often spend his days fishing down on the shore to the sea as his grandfather had done years before him. They had a garden out back, and that was how they earned their money and grew their food. They had three children, and they grew up quickly (twenty years is a short amount of time in the life of all mankind, really), and, when there was one child left in the house, Jack and his wife were left alone again, in the house by the shore, Jack's wife bustling about the house all day and taking care of the child, who would much rather play out in the yard by herself than stay cooped up inside

trying on dresses, and Jack down by the shore, fishing and enjoying the time spent by himself, alone, and away from his wife and his child.

He would always get nagged when he came home, and always about the same old thing:

"Why don't you ever do anything with your life? Why do you have to keep going down to the sea every day and leave me alone? Why? Why can't you do something useful, like earn us more money, rather than wasting your life away catching food for us? If you earned more money, we would have more than bleeding fish and vegetables to eat all the time. All we ever have is fish and vegetables! I hardly think I can avoid going mad if we don't stop eating nothing but bleeding fish and vegetables all the time! My poor heart can't bear it! My nerves will be shot if I never am allowed to eat something less plain and common and poor than fish and vegetables."

Thus she complained nearly every day, and Jack would keep coming home later and later and later each night, and leaving earlier and earlier. She would always say, if she was up before he could leave:

"Bring me back a better life, will you, Jack?"

Along with some comment about plain foods or the broken fence.

One day, he went down to the shore with his fishing pole (he always took much longer to catch enough for that day and the next with his pole than with a net). He picked a new spot he had never fished at before and cast the line. He sat down at waited for a fish. About noon, he had caught nothing, and was beginning to get restless, for if he didn't catch anything all day, his wife was sure to give him a good complaining to and accuse him of not being able to provide for his family.

At that moment, however, he felt a tug on the pole, and he tugged the line expertly in one direction and then another, sinking the hook into the fish and reeling it in. As he pulled his catch out of the water, he saw that he had hooked the most beautiful golden fish he had ever seen, although it was

small. It had skin like the gold in the palaces he had heard his father talking about, and it shone like the sunrise on a clear day. It was magnificent, but it was scared, and said to him in a feeble voice:

"Good sir, please, do not eat me, for I am too small to be of any use to you, and if you put me back in the water, you can catch me again when I have grown bigger."

Jack laughed. "I have heard that story before, fish. You cannot fool me like that. My wife and child need food to eat, and you will do fine."

"If you let me go," the fish said, "I will grant you a wish; anything that you ask for shall be yours."

Jack thought and responded: "I would like my house to be nicer, like those country houses belonging to rich people, and I would like my family to have better food and clothes."

The fish said: "Go home at the end of the day: you shall have what you have wished for."

And Jack threw the fish into the water and continued fishing until just before the sun went down.

The fish, however, once he had been thrown into the water, was very frightened, for he had no idea how to grant wishes at all, and had only said it to get out of the sticky situation he had gotten himself into by being too hungry. He knew, however, of a legendary cave that had helped one of her ancestors many, many generations ago, and he went there now, swimming for his life, not willing to have told a lie, even to someone he would never meet again.

He found the cave and went inside it, and asked aloud:

"What should I do? I can't grant wishes."

He had been told that the voice in the cave would know your question even before you asked it. He waited, though not long, for the reply.

"I will grant him his wish for you," the voice said, "but you must go

back to that same place every day, for the next five days, and be sure to be caught by his line, and every day tell him that his wish shall be granted, or his wife's wish, rather; and nevermind about the granting of the wishes — I will arrange that for you. And on the last day, the fifth day, you shall say this to him: 'Go home. Your wife has what she deserves.' And then you are to go back to that shore no more."

The little golden fish was very grateful to the voice for helping him in this confusing time for him, so he thanked it out loud (it replied with a "You are welcome") and swam home, ready to go to the same spot on the shore the next day.

Jack, meanwhile, was on his way home, and, when he arrived home, he found that his wish had come true: the siding and roof on his house was mended and repainted, and a white picket fence was surrounding it. The garden out back was growing beautifully, and his daughter was wearing a beautiful, blue dress and playing with a beautiful ball that would have cost him twenty five fish at the marketplace. His wife was bustling about, very pleased with her new abode, and rather confused as to how it all came about. He sat her down and told her the story, how he had caught the fish and it had granted him one wish in exchange for it letting him go, and that he had wished for this.

"How kind of you," Jack's wife said. "This really is very fortunate! Tomorrow, you should go to the same spot and catch the fish again, and this time wish that we were very wealthy and had a large mansion and beautiful grounds — for why should we be content with a little of a good thing when we could have so much more?"

So Jack, the next morning, set off for the same spot on the shore that he had fished at before. And just before noon, he caught the little golden fish again.

"Do not hurt me," the fish said, "for I will give you whatever you ask

for."

"I wish that my wife and child and I were very wealthy and had a mansion with beautiful grounds," Jack said, "For my wife is not content with the lot we have now."

"Your wish has been granted," the fish said, and Jack threw him into the water.

When he went home that day, he found that his house had been transformed into a three-story mansion, with a maid and a butler, and that there was a black, wrought-iron fence surrounding the place, with a grand, majestic gate flanked by brick pillars, each of which were topped with a marble statue of an eel rearing its head. There were hedges with all manner of animals carved into them, and it was magnificent to behold. His wife was wearing a dress that was both elegant and modest, both requirements for the clothing of upstanding ladies, and she hurried down the stairs to greet him as soon as he came inside. She flung her arms around him and called him the best husband in the world.

"You've really outdone yourself this time," she said to him.

She spent the rest of the day showing him around the grounds, showing off all the many things that would be a part of their new life, having as much fun as a child at Christmas, tearing apart the wrapping paper to find exactly what it was he wanted that year. She had calmed down mostly by dinner, and when they got into bed at the end of the day she said to Jack:

"You know, it's very wonderful being rich and all: but if one could have power as well as wealth, one would be really well off, don't you think? If I could be queen, or a noble or a duchess or something, we would be much better off as a family, don't you think? Yes, I should very much like to be queen, rather than just a rich nobody. Money doesn't do you any good if nobody knows your name. Tomorrow, could you go down to the sea again and catch that fish, and give it another wish for me, dear?"

Jack said that he could, and then the two of them went to sleep.

The next morning, Jack went down to the same place in the water and cast his line, and he caught the little golden fish again before three hours had passed.

“Don’t hurt me,” the little golden fish said. “I will grant you whatever you wish for.”

“My wife would like to be queen,” said Jack. “Can you give me that?”

“It is not I who grants your wishes, but another whom I know — nevertheless, because of him, your wish has been granted,” the fish said, and Jack threw it back into the ocean.

He went home immediately, and behold, where the mansion had stood before now stood a castle, with a drawbridge and a moat, and a thick, stone wall surrounding it. The place was filled with servants, and there was a separate kitchen outside which they used to cook the food before bringing it inside, delectable food, rare and delicious. There were heads of state in their home and important rulers, all asking her what she would have them do, and honoring her, and venerating her advice as though it were straight from a sacred text. She saw her husband standing there after some time, and said to him:

“Oh, do come in, do come in. Gentlemen, head of state, this is my dear husband, without whom I should be very much alone, and to whom I owe all of my present success.”

He spent the rest of the day listening to his wife conduct business, putting in his own two cents when he thought them appropriate.

That night, when the two of them laid down in a giant, four poster bed with beautiful, satin sheets and curtains that opened with the pull of a cord, Jack’s wife said to him:

“This is very wonderful: but there are some heads of state that were here today that were more powerful than I am. I am a very small queen, you

understand — many of these kingdoms could squash me if they had any notion to. I should very much like to be Empress, Empress over the Whole World. Can you do that for me? Can you catch the fish again?"

Jack said that he would try, and said goodnight and went to sleep.

The next morning, Jack caught the fish within the first hour.

"What do you want now?" the fish said.

"My wife is not satisfied with being queen. She wants now to be the Empress over the Whole World."

"Go home," the fish said. "Your wish has been granted."

Jack went home, and saw, in place of the castle, an enormous palace, which was made up of multiple buildings, each one stretching nearly to the heavens, with spires and statues of herself and long hallways with paintings along the walls. It was all very grand and royal, and there was a concert being held in the ballroom, which was huge and elaborately decorated. His wife was there, and she was wearing an enormous dress, and had on a huge collar that was the style at the time for very honored, very important individuals, and only priests and Empresses were allowed to wear them, or else there would be a very great outcry. After the concert, the musicians all paid tribute to her by bowing before her, prostrating themselves on the ground with their instruments at their side. When she went into the throne room, the people there all bowed to her, except her husband, who she took by the hand and led to the smaller throne next to hers, offering him a seat, which he took. The people worshipped her, and the heads of states, even the very powerful ones, succumbed to her judgment, praising it as good and just and wise, no matter what it was that she decided, as long as she gave an explanation of her decision. She was lauded all the day long as one would laud a goddess, and, at the end of the day, when her fancy clothes were taken off and she was given more comfortable (though still highly attractive and decorated and very much telling of her high position of authority) things to sleep in, and she

and her husband were in bed together, a bed almost as big as a room, with windows that opened automatically when you were well rested to let the sun in, she asked her husband:

"Husband, dear, don't you think it's so lovely, me being an Empress? It's nice having people bow to me and acknowledge me as something special. That's very nice. They practically worshipped me. But you know what? — I couldn't do a thing to change any of their problems, except command and advise, and I feel like that wasn't even right all the time, even though they said it was. There were crops and famines, and some of them said there were not enough hours in the day, and that there is a plague about that makes their children sick and need to stay in bed. I don't think being Empress is enough to right these things. I need more power. Empress isn't enough. I need to be God in order to right these wrongs. The people won't come to me if I can't fix their problems. Tomorrow, find the fish and wish that I become God."

Jack said he would, and the next day he went down to the sea. He caught the little golden fish almost immediately.

"What does your wife want now?" the fish asked Jack.

Jack sighed. "She wants to become God," he answered the fish.

The fish answered like he had been told to by the voice: "The granter of your wishes says: 'Go home. Your wife has what she deserves.' "

The fish was thrown back into the sea and swam home while Jack went to his. When he got there, where the palace had been before, there was nothing but an open field. His child was playing in the grass, and his wife was on her knees, crying. She looked up from her tears at her husband, humbled, and at that moment she was quieter than she had ever been in all his years of knowing her.

Jack looked around. There was no house, no garden, no anything, anywhere, as far as the eye could see, except for tall grass that bent under

the wind, and a female goose, eating the grass in mouthfuls in silence.

And Jack rebuilt his house.