

Once, a woodsman lived alone in the forest. He was a humble, sharp man, and prospered in that place just beyond the village.

One day, the woodsman awoke to the sound of knocking on the door of his cottage. He was curious, as it was not yet sunrise, and so he opened the door.

“Hello?” he called out. It was so gloomy that he could see little.

“Are you the man who lives here?” a voice spoke.

“Of course, I'm the woodsman.” the woodsman responded.

“Why do you not live with your fellows?” the voice asked.

“Such does not appeal to me. I am plenty happy here.” the woodsman said.

“Why do you care to be happy?” the voice asked.

It was at this point that the woodsman realized that the reason he could not see the person was not because of the dark, but rather because there was no figure at all past the doorway. A clever man, he considered his answer carefully.

“I know not.” the woodsman responded.

“A fool you are, to do things without knowing the reason why. I will spit on your joy and turn all of your pleasures to ashes.” the voice said.

The door shut by itself and the woodsman waited for a spell in the dark. Soon enough he was confident that the ghost had departed, and went back to sleep.

The first thing that the woodsman noticed was that he woke up too early. The sun was not yet risen, yet whenever he tried to go back to sleep, some malady would prevent his slumber. It was after an aching back, a sudden draft of wind, and a distracting itch that the woodsman decided to begin his chores early.

He tried to start the hearthfire next, but he found that all of his logs were too damp. Then, he went outside to collect more firewood, but found none to collect. After that, he went outside with his axe, but found that it was too blunt to strike anything.

So instead the woodsman drank his soup cold and ate no bread. As he did so, he heard the voice return.

“You are like driftwood in the ocean. Your happiness can be interrupted by anything whatsoever in the world. It will always be fleeting, never permanent. You live, but you are already entombed in your body.” the voice said.

“I suppose.” the woodsman started. “That I cannot help it. For with even the thought of denying myself, I continue to live.”

“You've made yet a more terrible sin. I will poison your heart and cast a sickness over your every last

experience.” the voice said.

Once the voice was done, the woodsman finished his meager breakfast. He then picked up his fishing rod and went out to the lake. He sat down at his favorite spot, but it didn't feel favorite. He then cast out his line and waited for a fish to bite. He waited and waited, but the waiting was not of the nice sort he usually enjoyed. When he finally felt a tug on the line, the woodsman impatiently reeled the line back in. The fish he caught was the longest one he had ever caught. But as his eyes fell upon it, the woodsman realized that either this would be his peak, a sad day, or just another step towards his peak, another sad day. As he reflected, the fish died, and the woodsman realized that another being had perished in vain. Gripped by grief, the woodsman buried the fish on dry land. The voice returned soon after.

“You are just like that fish. Both of you came to this world which is less substantial than a springtime dream. Why do you help them when you cannot even help yourself?” the voice spoke.

“If you had a reason, it would not be helping.” the woodsman said.

“How would you be helping, if their sorrows were as illusory as a fever-figure?” the voice asked.

“Because the people would most certainly not be an illusion.” the woodsman stated.

“I have had enough.” the voice said. “You would justify damnation. Had you only lived your life of meaningless merry, perhaps I would have spared you, but you have attempted to find truth where it cannot be found. You should have never come to this world, and now I will send you out. I will kill you and no-one shall find the body. Come midnight you shall be free.” the voice said.

The woodsman was affected, but did not say a word. Instead, he traveled to the hill on the rim of town, where the sorcerer lived. He told the man of what had occurred and asked if he could help. Being skilled in such matters, the sorcerer responded swiftly.

“That was not a ghost of one dead, but of one who has yet to be born.” the sorcerer said.

The woodsman went silent, for he knew that the ghosts of those who have not yet lived were untainted and stronger than the shades who had tasted of life's fruits.

“Only a master could help you with such a matter. You cannot reach such a man before the sun goes down, or find your way in the night. I will pray for you, friend, but that ghost is right in that your body is even now a corpse.” the sorcerer said, and in sadness sent out the woodsman with warding incantations.

The woodsman despaired for a while in the afternoon heat, until he felt that his heart was still beating. Almost unbidden, a memory then came to him, of an old seed his father had bequeathed to him. A plan hatching in his mind, the woodsman hurried off to his cottage. He found the heirloom which he had buried in a box beneath the floorboards and went off to a nice seedbed beside his home. He buried the seed, and then entered his cottage once more. When he returned outside, he was holding a pouch that contained the few coins he had saved throughout his lifetime.

The woodsman scurried throughout the village while the sun still hung in the sky. He bought many things he would not normally consider; fanciful carvings, fine cutlery, countless varieties of quality

viands, even a whole new dinner table. The woodsman carried off all of these luxuries to his home and arrayed them in a delicate manner. By the time of night, his once stark cottage had become a merry, festive place, the scene of a feast. The woodsman himself was seated at the head of the table, attended by no-one. Despite this, he drank and ate and enjoyed himself. As midnight approached, the ghost returned and roared.

“You cannot cover the hole in your heart with gilded glory, you fool!”

“It is not guilt, friend, but pure gold! It is only by your help that I realized I have not yet lived, and so I went and spent all of my savings on outfitting myself a proper home. I must thank you for opening my eyes.” the woodsman said while sipping from a carved cup.

“Then you have made yourself a wastrel as well as a fool. Harken, I will make you suffer every moment before midnight.” the voice said.

The woodsman continued to sip at his cup, before he realized that his wine had spoiled before his very tongue. So, the woodsman continued drinking with water. He even smiled, as he enjoyed its taste much more.

Angered, the ghost continued to hex the home. The woodsman soon found that his forks snapped, and so he continued to eat with his hands. The paint on the wall-carvings curled away, as happens in sunlight, yet the woodsman only appreciated the plain wood more. The rich meat that the woodsman had been eating dried as though exposed to the elements, and yet the ghost did not anticipate that the woodsman liked jerky more. In one last attempt, the ghost snapped the legs of the dining table in half, leaving the plates and many other assorted curios to scatter onto the ground. Yet the woodsman was unphased. He leaned down to retrieve his plate and began to eat from his lap, as he was accustomed to.

“You are hopelessly lost, as far from reality as the ocean's abyss is from the sun! My actions can scarcely affect you. Verily, in even a century a man could not begin to set aright your deranged reasonings. Please, tell me at least this before midnight comes and I must kill you. Why did you arrange a feast if you were the only one attending?” the ghost spoke.

“That is a very simple matter, friend.” the woodsman said. “But I am afraid that your question is framed incorrectly.”

“Do not play with me. I do not care for your games.” the ghost said.

“Yet you do! For the answer is that I arranged the feast to know happiness, and I am not the only one attending! Come along, now.” the woodsman exclaimed.

In an instant the ghost came to a realization and was caught by the seed. The woodsman dutifully tended to the seedbed for a year and cleaned the dirt off of the once-ghost as soon as he was born. The woodsman claimed the once-ghost as his own son, and found him to be filled with a love and goodness that the man had only scarcely suspected.

As soon as he was of age, the woodsman invited the once-ghost to his feast. Seeing his son there, shining and smiling and radiant, the woodsman could not help but exclaim.

“Who would have ever suspected such a frightful ghost could turn out such a darling son!”

The once-ghost grew strong and healthy, and when his father grew old, he built for him a homely estate in the lovely lands to the north. There to his father he gave a new wonder for every last misfortune he had inflicted before life.

When his father's days came to end, the once-ghost renounced the world and sought transcendence.

Some say both found each of their souls.