

STRONG MAN AND WEEPY BIRD CLIMB THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

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draft 3
August 31, 2016

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Cast of Characters

<u>KNICKERBOCKER</u> :	One of the Fates.
<u>TURNBUCKLE</u> :	Another.
<u>OHIO</u> :	The third.
<u>PAT</u> :	A little bird.
<u>SISYPHUS</u> :	A strong man.

Scene

Old Quality Mountain, where the immortals reside.

Time

New Year's Eve.

ACT I

Scene 1

Radio static.

Then, the year in sounds. One great cacophonous summary utterance. Then silence.

Then: three sets of knitting needles clacking in steady rhythm. The three Fates (TURNBUCKLE, OHIO, and KNICKERBOCKER) are knitting the tapestry of time.

One set pauses; KNICKERBOCKER has stopped. The other two continue.

KNICKERBOCKER

Still nothing.

OHIO

He's never been late, Knickerbocker. Ever. Don't worry.

TURNBUCKLE

He'll get here, he will.

KNICKERBOCKER

Unless he doesn't, Turnbuckle, what then?

OHIO

But he always has.

TURNBUCKLE

Ohio is right. He will.

KNICKERBOCKER continues knitting.

Then pauses.

And sighs.

KNICKERBOCKER

But it's noon! We should be able to see him now, rolling the great celebration ball up the path. We can't celebrate New Year's without him.

OHIO

In all the new years of all of time he's never been late.

TURNBUCKLE

Worrying won't solve anything, so knit. Just knit.

(CONTINUED)

KNICKERBOCKER

But what if he's hurt? What if he slipped on a loose rock and the great ball rolled over his back, and he's lying facedown across the trail and bleeding a long stream down to the base of the mountain? Accidents happen, even to immortals. I'm going to go look for him.

TURNBUCKLE

Absolutely not! We have to finish knitting the rest of the year. There's too much happening on New Year's Eve, and we the Fates must keep it all in order. Knickerbocker, sit down.

Knitting and working sounds.

KNICKERBOCKER sighs theatrically.

Then again, louder.

Then she inhales to sigh for a third time--

TURNBUCKLE

But if you're going to sulk, we will send someone to check on him. Ohio, summon Pat.

OHIO blows on a little party horn. "Bzzzt."

PAT enters.

PAT is a swallow, a little bird who darts and hops about like she's had too much espresso. She punctuates and interjects with little tweets and whistles.

PAT

Hi. Hi, everyone, hi. What's up?

KNICKERBOCKER

Sisyphus isn't here.

PAT

Really?

TURNBUCKLE

Really.

PAT

But he must know it's New Year's Eve. He has to get the ball here, to the peak of Old Quality Mountain, so that at midnight it can fall from the heavens into the human realm, for the sake of the human celebration called the Ball Drop.

(CONTINUED)

TURNBUCKLE

We know, Pat.

PAT

What are we going to do!

KNICKERBOCKER

That's why we summoned you. Go out and find him. Make sure he's okay.

TURNBUCKLE

He takes the same path every year, so you can see the track worn into the mountainside. Look there first.

PAT

Okay. Okay.

KNICKERBOCKER

If he needs to take a short-cut to get here by midnight, show him to the east-side access trail. Do you remember where that is?

PAT

Do I remember where that is: yes. East-side access trail. Okay. Going to find Sisypheus. Be back before you know it!

PAT begins to flutter off.

TURNBUCKLE

Pat! One more thing!

PAT

Yes?

TURNBUCKLE

Be discreet. As far as anyone knows, it's just another New Year's Eve. No need to worry.

PAT

Got it.

TURNBUCKLE

Immortals and humans both. That means no Twitter.

PAT

No Twitter. I am putting my iPhone on silent and putting it away. Won't even look at it.

TURNBUCKLE

Okay, Pat. You're dismissed.

(CONTINUED)

KNICKERBOCKER
Thank you.

PAT
I won't let you down! Thank you thank you thank you!
PAT exits.

OHIO
Why does she have that thing?

TURNBUCKLE
What thing?

OHIO
That rectangle.

TURNBUCKLE
I don't know. She likes it.

OHIO
She likes it?

TURNBUCKLE
Human social networks and stuff.

OHIO
Absurd.

KNICKERBOCKER
I hope she finds him.

TURNBUCKLE
Everything is fine. Everything has always been fine.
Everything is going to be fine. Knit.

The knitting resumes.

Scene 2

PAT aflutter, searching here and there.

PAT
Sisyphus!
Sisyphus!
Nothing up and down the old trail.
Where could he be?
Come on, Pat, use that bird brain. Where could he be?
Sisyphus?
Sisyphus?

*Traveling sounds, wildlife sounds, work out some
more of the soundscape of Old Quality Mountain
later.*

(CONTINUED)

PAT
Sisyphus?

SISYPHUS
(far off))
Go away!

PAT
I knew I'd find you! I'm a bird, so I'm good at finding stuff.

SISYPHUS
Goooo awaaaaay!

PAT
I'm coming for you, friendo!

Scene 3

Slow footsteps on a rocky trail. A strong man exerts his maximum physical effort. The great round stone rolls slowly closer.

SISYPHUS works for a while. It is tiring. The going is slow. But he is Strong. SO STRONG.

PAT enters aflutter.

PAT
By Jove, I've found you! It's you! You're okay, man!
Hug me!

SISYPHUS
Get off of me.

PAT
I'm so happy you're okay.

SISYPHUS
Who says I'm not okay?

PAT
The Fates, man, up there at the peak! Knickerbocker's mad worried about you. They were peeking down your usual path and they couldn't see you so they called me. What are you doing all the way out here?

SISYPHUS
There's no trail out here.

PAT
I know, doesn't that make this way harder?

(CONTINUED)

SISYPHUS
Yes.

PAT
You want that?

SISYPHUS
Yes.

PAT
Why?

SISYPHUS
I've rolled this stone up this mountain for thousands of years, always by the same path. It wore a track in the ground. Last year: too easy. This year: no path.

PAT
But now you're way behind!

SISYPHUS
This is a leap year. I have an extra day to get to the peak by New Year's Eve. I can't be far.

PAT
Crud!

SISYPHUS
What?

PAT
Today is New Year's Eve, man!

SISYPHUS
Oh.

PAT
You're not hurrying.

SISYPHUS
Should I be?

PAT
This is okay. This is okay: we'll just take the east-side road like Knickerbocker said.

SISYPHUS
What road?

PAT
There's a secondary trail to the peak. Knickerbocker said we could use it.

(CONTINUED)

SISYPHUS

I've been up and down this mountain thousands of times.

PAT

It's a well-kept secret. The Fates use it for deliveries, a guy rolls a wagon up there every two weeks because Ohio likes a mortal beverage called "Old Milwaukee."

SISYPHUS

So it's not very steep.

PAT

No way! If a mortal with a wagon can do it, you'll have no trouble.

Scene 4

Back to the FATES. Knitting needles. Clack clack clack.

All three of them are knitting diligently and rhythmically, until KNICKERBOCKER pauses again.

OHIO

Knickerbocker, don't even say it.

KNICKERBOCKER

I'm concerned!

OHIO

Why?

KNICKERBOCKER

What if some horrible monster got Sisyphus AND Pat?

OHIO

Oh, please.

KNICKERBOCKER

It could happen.

OHIO

No, it couldn't. Working will keep you from fretting. Chin up.

TURNBUCKLE

Both of you hush.

OHIO

Yeah, Knickerbocker.

(CONTINUED)

TURNBUCKLE

I said both of you!

*All three of them work in silence.
There's a heavy sigh.
The three of them have been working too close
together for a long time. There's tension.*

TURNBUCKLE

Anyway, Knickerbocker is right.

KNICKERBOCKER

See.

TURNBUCKLE

Although Ohio is close.

OHIO

See?!

TURNBUCKLE

Anything might happen. Some monster may have gotten both of them. Some dreadful creature might be working its way up the mountain, baring its razor claws and running a long black tongue over six rows of needle teeth. It is smiling. For it has climbed from the darkest sulfuric pits of the Underworld and emerged at the bottom of the sea. It swam to the surface and made its way to the rocks. It scaled the coastal cliffs and went to the human country. It laid a war path through the villages and cities until nowhere was one brick left seated atop another, and all the still bodies were blue with lack of blood. It proceeded to the foot of Old Quality Mountain, where it found the path of Sisyphus, two feet behind an enormous stone, and it stalked and danced the path until this very morning, when the sulfur-smelling mangy hunter leapt upon Sisyphus' back and ripped the flesh of his throat. It waited for Pat to come searching, then speared her with one sharp claw and ate her in one bite like an olive. It has even devoured the great stone. And still we sit here and knit the tapestry of time, unaware that the hunter is still hungry, and it's coming for us, and soon will be the end, an hour or a lifetime from now. Hungry, violent Time comes to eat our friends, and us, and all the past, and when nothing is left it will begin with its left foot and finally devour itself.

OHIO

(frightened)

You're frightening Knickerbocker. Stop it.

(CONTINUED)

TURNBUCKLE

That's the end of the story anyway.

KNICKERBOCKER

Do you want this to be the end?

TURNBUCKLE

I'm indifferent. It's only my job.

KNICKERBOCKER

I don't.

OHIO

Why? Do you feel sympathy for the mortals?

TURNBUCKLE

It isn't required.

KNICKERBOCKER

I don't think I do, but I like this work. I like sitting up here. I like Pat. I like catching up with Sisyphus at the end of every year, when he rests for a moment before the stone rolls down again.

OHIO

You're sentimental.

KNICKERBOCKER

Life is life, and there is no alternative.

TURNBUCKLE

Hush.

Work.

OHIO

Anyway, I'm sure that was just a metaphor.

TURNBUCKLE

Hush.

Work.

Scene 5

SISYPHUS. PAT. As before.

SISYPHUS

I don't think so, Pat.

SISYPHUS

Oh, come on, Sisyphus.

SISYPHUS

If it's an easy path, I'm not interested.

PAT

But what about the mortals?

SISYPHUS

What about the mortals?

PAT

I even got an iPhone and a Twitter account so I can keep up on all their mortal business. There's so much drama down there. They're so happy one day and so sad the next.

SISYPHUS

Yes. It's very pathetic.

PAT

(beginning to cry)

I KNOW.

SISYPHUS

Please, stop crying.

PAT

(continuing to cry)

And at New Year's they're all happy. No matter how terrible the year has been, they all actually believe that the next year is going to be better. Everything's going to get better, by tomorrow! They really believe it! And do you know how hard 2016 has been for the mortals?

SISYPHUS

No. Was it bad?

PAT

It was so bad, Sisyphus. It was so, so bad. I can tell you all about it from Twitter. I'll start from January. "January 1, 12:38 a.m.--"

SISYPHUS

Please, no, please don't read me Twitter.

PAT

(beginning to recover)

You're right. We have to focus on what's important.

SISYPHUS

I just want to push my stone in peace.

(CONTINUED)

PAT

No. I'm helping! I'm not going anywhere, and we're taking the eastern shortcut to get to the party in time!

SISYPHUS

I don't think I can, Pat. I don't think the gods would like me taking a shortcut.

PAT

Why?

SISYPHUS

My duty is to work hard. It's difficult for a reason. If I make it easier, that's defying my fate.

PAT

Defying your fate? The whole reason you're behind schedule is because you wanted to make it harder.

SISYPHUS

That's different.

PAT

I don't see how. It got too easy so you made it harder. Now it's too hard, so if you make it easier you'll be back where you started.

SISYPHUS

That's lazy logic, Pat. Go along. Tell the Fates I'm just fine. If I cheat they'll only make it worse for me.

PAT

They wouldn't do that. Knickerbocker said it was okay. They're the ones who weave out the whole fabric of time, the future and everything. She said it was okay. She wouldn't try to hurt you just for doing what she said.

SISYPHUS

I know.

PAT

And they love you, all the Fates, they do.

SISYPHUS

I know.

PAT

Then what's the matter? What are you afraid of?

(CONTINUED)

SISYPHUS

They're not the ones in charge of my punishment. They don't decide the future. They only reveal it.

PAT

How do you know that?

SISYPHUS

If they could save me, why haven't they?

PAT doesn't know what to say.

SISYPHUS

Go on, Pat. Go back up and tell them I'll just be late.

PAT

Okay.

PAT starts to leave--from our perspective, SISYPHUS' voice is farther away. They carry on their conversation shouting.

PAT

This better not be another trick.

SISYPHUS

It makes no difference.

PAT

You're so selfish, Sisyphus. You suffer a lot but it's only for yourself. It may be stupid to care about mortals, but it's not as stupid as caring about nothing.

SISYPHUS

Go on. I'm done talking!

PAT

I'm not! I'll say when we're done talking. Last chance to come by the shortcut: if you won't do it for the mortals, do it for me!

SISYPHUS

No!

PAT

I promise I'll help you push the ball every day next year!

SISYPHUS

No!

PAT

I'll do it for a whole month, you can have a whole month vacation while I push!

SISYPHUS

Don't you get it? I don't want that!

PAT

What do you want?

SISYPHUS

I want you to leave me be. For the whole year.

PAT

What?

SISYPHUS

Restraining order. I'll take your shortcut, we'll get there by midnight. But after the ball drops and I head down to get it, you go to the other side of Old Quality Mountain, and you leave me be the whole year long.

PAT

I had no idea you felt that way, Sisyphus.

SISYPHUS

When other people are around, they think they should be helping. Sometimes they even try. It's embarrassing. I hate it. Easier to be alone.

PAT

Wow, man. Okay. I'll do what you want. It's worth it.

SISYPHUS

For the sake of the mortals' little party?

PAT

Yeah. I mean, if you don't really want me around anyway.

SISYPHUS

It's not personal.

PAT

I guess.

SISYPHUS

Alright.

Let's see this shortcut. Lead the way.

PAT chirps and twitters and the expedition goes forth.

scene 5.1

Brief transition:
Knitting needles click and clack.
Music.
KNICKERBOCKER sighs.
Heavy footsteps and bird tweeting.

Scene 6

SISYPHUS and PAT. Night sounds. Crickets.

PAT

It sure is dark. I'm scared.

SISYPHUS

Of what? Crickets?

PAT

It's dark.

SISYPHUS

It's night.

PAT

Really, really dark.

SISYPHUS

Like every night.

PAT

Certain nights are darker than others, even if the light's the same. You're not scared, though.

SISYPHUS

I'm never scared.

PAT

Birds don't like to stay up late. Once it's dark, we think it's likely to stay dark forever.

SISYPHUS

That's very wise.

PAT

So I'm scared.

SISYPHUS

That's okay. Just keep talking so I don't lose track of you.

Scene 7

The FATES.

OHIO

They won't make it in time.

KNICKERBOCKER

Yes, they will.

OHIO

We should be able to hear them by now.

KNICKERBOCKER

Everyone quiet, then. Listen.

Pause in the knitting.

Silence.

One set of needles begins again.

TURNBUCKLE

We shouldn't be stopping our work. It's nearly time.

OHIO

I don't hear anything.

KNICKERBOCKER

Sh. Listen.

OHIO

Do you, Turnbuckle?

TURNBUCKLE

Shh.

No.

OHIO

They're not going to make it.

OHIO's knitting needles begins again.

TURNBUCKLE

Knickerbocker.

KNICKERBOCKER

Hm?

TURNBUCKLE

It's nearly midnight. Work.

KNICKERBOCKER

Oh yes.

(CONTINUED)

All three sets of needles are clacking and clicking. They work without speaking.

KNICKERBOCKER

They might still come.

TURNBUCKLE

Chin up, Knickerbocker. What do we say?

KNICKERBOCKER

"Chin up. Shut up. Knit hard."

TURNBUCKLE

That's right.

I'm on my last row. What about you?

OHIO

Me too.

KNICKERBOCKER

Me too.

TURNBUCKLE

They're beginning the countdown below.

KNICKERBOCKER

If we listen we can hear it. Knit softer.

The clicking and clacking continue, but more softly.

In the distance, human voices count down, but don't quite reach "one" yet.

Scene 7.1

Later.

PAT

(wailing)

I can't get a GPS signal! And holy cripes, we only have four more minutes! Hurry!

But SISYPHUS stops. There's an odd silence, the sort that follows when you've grown used to a background noise and are surprised when it stops.

PAT

What is it?

SISYPHUS

If we don't know where we're going, it doesn't matter how fast we move.

(CONTINUED)

PAT

Oh, you're right. It's no use. I failed. There's no point, Sisyphus, we'll never get there in time now. Crud.

SISYPHUS

Hop up on my head and take a look.

PAT does this.

PAT

Okay.

SISYPHUS

See anything?

PAT

Wait: footprints!

SISYPHUS

The beer man? We may make it after all, Pat.

PAT flutters and twitters up ahead to the footprints.

PAT

It's so hard to see.

SISYPHUS

Big feet? Small feet? Wheel tracks?

PAT

Big feet. One set of big feet. Oh no, it's one set of big feet inside a great big track.

SISYPHUS

A great big track?

PAT

A path worn into the ground from a great big rolling rock, Sisyphus, oh no, we've gone in a great big circle.

PAT weeps.

SISYPHUS

What time is it, Pat?

PAT

Just about midnight.

(CONTINUED)

SISYPHUS

They'll be counting.

PAT

I know.

SISYPHUS

Can you see the video on that gadget?

PAT

I guess.

PAT gets the video on her iPhone. A crowd gathers before a great empty space. They look up in the sky from whence the ball ought to drop. There's nothing there at all.

SISYPHUS

Let me see.

PAT

They gather up like this every year and when you get your ball to the peak and it falls all the way down these people cheer and clap and kiss each other on the faces like this.

PAT starts to kiss SISYPHUS on the face.

SISYPHUS

Stop that.

The thin sound of the countdown from the iPhone speaker. Three, two, one, then silence.

PAT

What do we do now?

SISYPHUS

Same as every year.

PAT

I guess I better keep my promise then. Head on back for your Year of No Pat.

SISYPHUS

Guess so.

PAT

See you around, I guess.

SISYPHUS
Wait.

PAT
I'm not crying.

SISYPHUS
They'll go on and be just fine. They'll understand.

PAT
No they won't. Haven't you ever been to Twitter?

SISYPHUS
But they'll go on. It was a hard year, but mortals are tough. They're only just weepy and despondent.

PAT
They're mean and stubborn like you, too.

SISYPHUS
Something like that.

SISYPHUS pushes the stone hard and it crashes and rolls away. The sound fades slowly to silence--not because it hit the bottom and stopped, but because it's so far away, and the sound can't reach us anymore.

SISYPHUS
Time to start again. Are you coming?

PAT
Really?

SISYPHUS
I won't ask twice.

PAT
Can I stand on your head?

SISYPHUS
No.

PAT
Okay. Okay, let's go.

They go off.

Scene 8

The knitting concludes.

TURNBUCKLE
Done.

KNICKERBOCKER
I still can't believe it.

OHIO
Hope is a costly habit.

TURNBUCKLE
Leave her be. I'm sure she feels bad enough without you helping. Happy New Year, everyone. Ohio, blow the celebration horn.

*OHIO blows the little party horn again: bzzzt.
KNICKERBOCKER sighs.*

OHIO
Oh, cheer up, Knickerbocker. Why are disasters always so surprising? Nothing could be more routine.

KNICKERBOCKER
He won't be late next time.

OHIO
Maybe. Maybe it's something even worse, but I don't know. Do you?

TURNBUCKLE
What do I know? The curtain will fall. The bar will close, your friends move away, your faith will let you down at the moment you need it most. But we're okay. Those things can't hurt us. Hope, pain, joy, grief, those things were invented by mortals. For us, we roll the stone, we sing a song, we knit the long year. Chin up. Knit hard.

*TURNBUCKLE begins to knit.
OHIO does too.*

TURNBUCKLE
Knickerbocker, get started.

KNICKERBOCKER doesn't respond.

TURNBUCKLE
Knickerbocker?

*She is silent. We wait for her to begin.
End of play.*