

Forgiveness

It was one of those lazy, summer days when nothing seemed to happen. Joe stretched out his legs, resting his back against a tree, enjoying the rich smells of sun-drenched leaves and grass. Below the hill where he sat he could see his village sprawling peacefully, with its wooden buildings and thatched roofs. He was content in a comfortable, drowsy sort of way. He was glad it was a holiday, and that school had been cancelled. He didn't particularly like school, and probably wouldn't even go if it weren't for his brother. Why did Luke even care? He was older than Joe, but still, that didn't mean he always knew what was best. Joe could be doing something useful, like earning money, for example. Now, if father were still alive... Or mother, for that matter... He sighed, and let the matter drop. It wasn't worth worrying about on a day like this.

By the time Joe headed home, the sun was slowly setting. He strolled into the town, whistling tunelessly, with his hands shoved carelessly into his pockets. Suddenly, Joe heard an excited, raised babble of voices coming from the square, which was more than enough to catch his attention on a lazy, summer evening. Stopping his whistling abruptly, he trotted over to the gathered crowd.

"What is it? What happened?" He wove his way expertly through the crowd, finally stopping next to Benjamin, the town baker. Ben was a burly, towering man, with a low, gritty voice, who had the reputation of being something of a cynic.

"'S been a robbery, boy. Tim, the goldsmith. I always did say he didn't take good enough care of all the valuable things he had..."

"He stole his own gold?!" Joe's heart skipped a beat as he leaned in closer, all drowsiness gone.

"Of course not! Don't be ridiculous! Someone broke into his house. Looks like it was a couple of days ago, too. Tim is the most horrible scatterbrain I ever knew! Didn't realize until today! Anyway, someone made off with all the gold he stored. And it looks like he was repairing the Earl's wife's own jewelry, too. Earl's furious! Says the thief will lose a hand, and that's if he's lucky! I think he'll make it a hanging punishment, if the thief's found."

"Who on earth would steal the gold?!" Joe gasped. Stealing was considered a major crime in any case, but on top of everything, that gold must be worth a small fortune! Whoever had stolen it would be in for a rough time, if caught - especially since the Earl had taken personal offence at the robbery.

"Well..." Ben raised an eyebrow with an air of superiority. "*I* have a pretty decent idea of who did it, if they'd ask me... But who ever asks me?"

"Who do you think did it, Ben?!"

"Humph! Well, we'll see, we'll see." Ben glanced at Joe "Now off with you, I have work to do!"

Joe headed to his home, deep in thought. Whom did Ben suspect? Whom did the Earl suspect? Was it one of the villagers? A stray beggar? Everyone had known that Tim was a bit careless at times, but no one had ever dared to try their luck at theft. Until now, apparently. Joe pushed open the creaking wooden door, but the single room that made up the house was dark and silent. That meant that Luke hadn't come back from work yet. Joe sighed, glad that he could have some time to himself. Luke worked as a mapmaker for the Earl up at the castle, which was a good half hour's walk away. He was rarely home before nightfall. Joe looked down at his shirt and winced, noticing a ragged tear in his sleeve. Luke would be very angry if he saw that. Joe

kicked open his chest, but couldn't seem to find his needle or any thread. Maybe Luke had some... He knelt next to the chest with his brother's things, and started rummaging through the clothes and other possessions that were neatly arranged inside. Suddenly, he inhaled sharply, feeling his breath get sucked out of him as he suppressed a muttered curse.

"Oh no! No, no... Please, no!" Joe staggered away from the chest, staring at the contents of a parcel he had just found at the bottom of the chest. It was handful of small, golden objects that all had the stamp of Timothy, the town's goldsmith. His brother... What had Luke done?

The door slammed open behind him, and Joe spun around, his mouth dry. People crowded into the room... Four? Five? He wasn't sure.

"There! What did I tell you?" Ben's triumphant voice reverberated around the small space. "Didn't I tell you the gold would be here?"

"Where did you get that gold, son?" Joe recognized the other men now; they were town guards, their faces grim. For some reason, he noticed their boots. Big. Heavy. Caked with mud...

"I think those are mine, gentlemen." Luke's voice was cool and even. Joe saw him outlined in the door, his thick, dark brown curls falling onto his eyes, his short beard framing an impassive mouth.

The head of the town guards scowled, turning his back on Joe after snatching the gold away from him.

"And I *know* you're coming with us. Did you really think you'd get away with it, Luke?"

"I did, actually." Luke cocked his head to one side, his voice slightly tinged with mockery.

Joe felt numb. So numb... Was he forgetting how to breathe? Was this actually happening? All the sounds seemed to be somehow muffled. The guards grabbing Luke, a thud as one of them kneed him in the stomach, making him double over, the leader barking orders to the others to tie Luke's hands and search him, and then deadly silence, when Joe finally realized that he was alone, shivering in the dark.

They came back a few hours later. Joe was still sitting curled up in a corner when he heard the loud tramping of feet outside the door. There were three guards this time, and once again they seemed disproportionately big in the small house.

"Get up, boy!" The head of the guards barked. "Did you know anything about this robbery? Anything at all? Where's the rest of the gold hidden? Speak up!"

"No, sir... I mean, I didn't know anything about it, sir... Please, you have to believe me!" Joe stammered, his eyes wide, backing away from the looming figure in front of him.

One of the younger guards knelt down next to Joe, his voice quiet and soothing.

"Don't worry, son, we're not going to hurt you. We know you didn't steal anything, alright? Just please, if you know anything about the theft, if you saw your brother do anything strange in the last few days, or if you have any idea where the gold could be, just tell us. Please."

"I...I didn't see anything... Only... Well, Luke came home really late one night. I think it was Thursday...Or was it Friday? It was strange, because he usually always comes home at the same time. I asked him about it, and he said there was...Urgent work at the castle..." Joe could feel the words tumbling out of his mouth, his mind racing frantically, before he could actually register what he was saying. He buried his face in his hands. "But I didn't know anything about the theft! Really, I didn't..."

"And you have no idea where the gold is?"

“No!”

“Right.” For once, the head of the town guard sounded more tired than anything else.
“Search the whole house, lads. D’you hear? Search everywhere!”

In a small town, news carries quickly. It was early in the morning, and already the whole marketplace was buzzing with the news of Luke’s arrest. Joe kept his head down, heading to the baker’s to buy some bread. He had wanted to stay at home, alone, but hunger had finally gotten the better of him.

“Joe! Joe dear!” Joe turned, recognizing the loud, clucking voice of Mrs. Spencer, the tailor’s widow. The kindly woman had always been something of a mother to orphaned Joe, taking him under her wing and doing everything she could for him.

“Are you alright, dear?” she continued, enveloping him in a big, warm hug as Ben viewed both of them skeptically from the bakery’s window. “I mean, after the *awful* things that happened yesterday! Just terrible, I was just saying to Ben... Wasn’t I, Ben? Anyway, I always knew your brother was crooked, Joe! Not a good type *at all*, I’m afraid! Always so *gloomy*, and so *arrogant*! He did let you live with him and all, I mean after your parents died, but he was never *affectionate*. Never did more than was strictly required of him! And always so *brooding*! Gave me the shivers, he did, and I don’t mind saying so! This must be so hard on you... And you being such a *nice* boy and all that... So hard... Don’t worry about a thing, I will take care of you from now on...”

Ben grunted, turning to a new customer.

“Huh! They say that Luke actually confessed to the crime! Refuses to say where the gold’s hidden, though... Searched his whole house, too. Tore the place apart... The guards say they’ll try torture next. Usually works with this kind...”

“Ben!” Mrs. Spencer released Joe, turning on Ben with a look of shocked horror. “*Not* in front of the boy! Are you alright, Joe dear? You look pale.”

“I’m just sayin’, the man’s a fool if you ask me. Would be so much easier on him if he just gave them the gold...”

“For goodness sake, Benjamin, be quiet! The *boy*! Can’t you *see* he’s upset enough already? Joe, you really must move in with me! I couldn’t live one day in a robber’s house, I’m sure!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Spencer...” Joe was truly relieved. He wasn’t sure he could spend another night in that house, either.

“Well, then, you should come home with me immediately! Come on!” She strutted away from the bakers shop, patting Joe on the head and guiding him in the direction of her house.

“Mrs. Spencer?” Joe looked away, hoping she wouldn’t see the pain in his eyes when he started speaking again.

“Yes, dear?”

“If...if you had a brother who was a thief, would you still...you know...love him? Would you be able to...forgive him for what he’d done?”

“Oh...! Well... I don’t *know*, I’m sure!” Mrs. Spencer gasped, for once looking at a loss for words. “I mean...He is a *criminal*, isn’t he? And you can’t really love someone like *that*! I would think that I couldn’t have a criminal for a brother, and if he already were my brother, well...I’d have to treat him like any other criminal! You can’t make *exceptions* for family, can

you?! It wouldn't be *decent*! And, besides, well... People may think you actually *approve* of what they've done!"

"Yes, of course, that makes sense... Thank you, Mrs. Spencer. I guess I'll have to write to John, too..."

"What's that, dear?"

"I'll have to write to our eldest brother, John. Tell him what happened..."

"Very good idea, dear..."

Joe nodded, silently. What had happened to his life? How had everything fallen apart so quickly? Why had Luke done it? It made no sense... It made no sense. None of it did. Joe closed his eyes, shivering and feeling terribly empty... It hurt. It hurt so much. His head was spinning. One evening, and somehow nothing would ever be the same again.

Joe couldn't seem to fall asleep. The bed Mrs. Spencer had given him was comfortable enough, but it just felt so...unfamiliar. He shifted his position again, and stared up at the dappled pattern the moonlight was leaving on the ceiling. At home, he'd known every shadow, the outline of every tree and branch, the exact way the pale light shifted across the room as the night dragged on. At home... Joe bit his lip. That wasn't his home anymore. What had Luke been thinking? Joe kept reliving the same moment over and over again; the sound of Luke's derisive voice as he addressed the guards. Luke had barely looked at him, but surely, *surely* he had known what Joe must have been feeling? The guards arresting Luke, leading him away... Where was Luke now? What was he thinking about? Joe turned over again, trying to block out all thoughts related to his brother, but they kept coming back, lingering in the back of his mind. Doubts. Fears. Memories. He had never felt so confused, shocked, and uncertain before in his life. What was he supposed to do now? How was he supposed to carry on with his life? More questions. More doubts. Joe sat up abruptly, fumbled around, and finally managed to light a candle. Sitting down by the windowsill, he got out a piece of paper and began to write: *Dear John*, he began, *I'm sorry to have to be the one to give you such bad news...*

The crowd was mutinous, rumbling like an ominous raincloud. It had been three days since Luke's arrest, and no matter what they did, the authorities could not get him to confess where he'd hidden the gold. In fact, it was rumored that he hadn't uttered a single word; no pleas, no groans, just obstinate silence. Finally, the Earl had given up, and decided to go ahead with the execution. But now, it seemed, he was planning to show mercy; the sentence was not death, but the loss of a hand, followed by another day in the dungeons and then exile.

"Too soft..." Ben grumbled. "Earl being lenient because Luke had been his mapmaker... Huh! I ask you! Anyone else would have lost their head, I dare say..."

Joe, standing next to Mrs. Spencer, didn't respond. He felt so lost, so alone... And he still couldn't understand, why had Luke done it? And how was Joe supposed to act? What was he supposed to *feel*? What *did* he feel?

The crowd gathered around the scaffold suddenly went silent. The guards were leading Luke across the square. Luke looked horrible. He was limping badly, his shirt was covered in ugly, dark stains, and his face was bruised and swollen. Joe wanted to look away, to disappear, but somehow couldn't make himself move, feeling as if he had been turned to stone, mesmerized by the trickle of blood seeping from his brother's broken lip. He felt sick. One of the guards pushed Luke towards the stairs leading up to the scaffold and he stumbled. The guard grabbed

him by his collar and dragged him up the remaining steps. And suddenly the crowd erupted, as everyone, as if by some unspoken command, began screaming curses and abuses at the guilty man. Luke just stood there, breathing heavily, his face dark and unreadable, and completely unemotional. And suddenly Joe couldn't stand it any longer. Caught up by the overpowering hate of the crowd, he yelled:

"You thief! You disgusting, lying disgrace! How could you do this, you arrogant, heartless coward! How could you do this to me?!"

He felt the appreciative glances of his fellow townsmen, and saw a few admiring nods. Someone murmured:

"Such a good lad, that one. Not afraid to condemn his own brother! That's real virtue for you!"

Joe experienced a surge of wild exhilaration; it felt *good*. Luke met his furious gaze briefly, his dark eyes still void of emotion. Joe was trembling all over, his eyes fixed on his brother's pale, distant face.

"You're no brother of mine!" he spat.

And even then, he got no reaction from Luke. Joe felt Ben's hand squeeze his shoulder, and heard a soft note in the baker's usually gruff voice.

"Well done, boy. Yes. Very well done..."

For the first time in days, Joe didn't feel any doubts. He felt confident and strong. He felt accepted. The executioner forced Luke to his knees, placing his left hand on the wooden block. Joe held his breath, feeling the blood pounding in his ears as the ax gleamed in the sunlight, and then came crashing down. Luke's face contorted for a second, and there were a few gasps from the crowd. There was so much blood...

Luke dragged himself up the forest path, cradling the bloody stump that was once his hand. The pain he felt was almost mind numbing, flowing up his arm in hot, agonizing waves. Everything hurt... *Not much farther to go*, he assured himself, *I'm almost there*... Up ahead, he saw the light coming from a house window. Somehow he walked the last few steps, and knocked on the door. It flew open immediately, and Luke saw John's broad, worried face.

"Luke! Oh, thank goodness your alive! I just got Joe's letter, I was about to set out to town, to do what I could..."

For the first time in all these days, Luke finally let all the pain and exhaustion wash over him. He practically collapsed over the threshold, and with infinite gratitude and relief felt his older brothers strong arms catch him and stop him from falling. Luke's thin, short frame seemed even smaller next to John, who was a massive giant. John almost carried Luke into the house, murmuring

"You're safe now, Luke. You're going to be alright. You need sleep, a bath, food... And we need to see to all those cuts and bruises... Just take it easy. You're going to be alright, I promise."

Luke didn't even try replying; he had finally slipped into an empty, dreamless darkness.

"Thank you," Luke said simply.

John had just finished bandaging the mangled remains of his arm. It was the morning of the next day. Luke was sitting in his brother's kitchen, his whole body crisscrossed with

bandages and covered in healing ointments. John pushed a cup of something hot and aromatic towards him, and Luke accepted it without question.

“Where’s your wife, John?”

“Gone to visit her parents. Children are with her.” John settled down at the other side of the rough, oak table, and then reached over, placing his hand on Luke’s arm and looking into his eyes.

“Luke... Why did you do it? I thought... I thought I’d always helped you enough. That you’d never needed anything. If you’d wanted money, if you’d wanted... anything, really, all you had to do was ask me for help. Why on earth did you steal the gold?”

Luke sighed, looking out the window, and when he finally met John’s compassionate, questioning look his older brother was surprised by how much pain Luke had in his eyes.

“I never stole that gold, John.” He said quietly.

“What?!” John choked, staring at his younger brother. “I don’t understand...”

“I never took that gold. Joe did.”

“JOE?! *Our* Joe?!”

“Yeah. Our Joe.”

“No... Surely not! There must be some mistake!”

“No, John. It was definitely him.”

“Why? And he let you... He didn’t say anything!”

“Why did he steal the gold? I’m not sure. Excitement, perhaps? He might have thought it would be ‘daring’ or ‘heroic’ or something. Maybe he was just bored, or he wanted the money, although I have no idea what he would have spent it on. I found some of the gold pieces he’d hidden in his pocket, and that’s what the guards found when they came to search our house. I’m guessing he’d buried the rest somewhere, but he wanted to quietly spend these in another village or something. It makes no sense, but he is just a child, after all. He panicked when he realized I’d found him out. I think he thought that *I’d* hand him in. And then the guards came, and he was terrified...”

“You lost your hand... You... You were *tortured*, Luke! Joe... That coward didn’t deserve what you did for him!”

“No... no, he didn’t.” Luke looked thoughtfully at John, his face calm and serious. “But it was a sacrifice I was willing to make.”

“You shouldn’t have done it!”

“If he’d been arrested, and if he’d lost a hand, all that would do would be to turn him into a bitter, resentful cripple. Not to mention the fact that the Earl was seriously considering executing the thief. This way, perhaps Joe will change someday. Maybe, one day, he’ll grow up and understand.”

“You really think he’ll change? After everything he was willing to let you go through?”

“It’s a chance I’m willing to give him. And you know father would have done the same for Joe. For any of us.”

John opened his mouth, and then closed it. There was nothing he could say to that. Luke gave him a wry smile, shrugging slightly, and then wincing at the stab of pain the movement produced. John frowned, shaking his head.

“There’s just one thing I still don’t understand. Why did you keep the gold you found in Joe’s pocket? Why didn’t you hide it or bury it?”

Luke tried shrugging again, more gingerly this time.

“I wasn’t expecting them to search the house. I was planning on talking to Joe that night, and returning all the gold to Timothy on the next day but...well, I never got the chance.”

John nodded thoughtfully. Luke coughed, shifting in his chair.

“So...I was wondering if I could stay with you, John? Your wife won’t mind an extra...er, hand...on the farm, will she?”

“I never gave you the option of leaving, little brother.” John grinned briefly, looking out the window.

“Yes,” Luke smiled “I suppose you never did.”