

I went back to the diner yesterday. There's this odd feeling you get when you revisit somewhere that's lived only in your memories for so long. The grandeur you gave it in your mind gives way to mundanity, and you realize that here is just another place like anywhere else. I sat down at the bar where a young man who looked like he had no idea what he was doing asked me if I needed a menu.

"No thanks, I'll have the classic, white toast, bacon, sunny-side-up, and coffee."

He forgot my cutlery when he came back with my order.

"You've been here before? I don't recognize you."

"A long time ago, yeah."

"Ah, so you've known this place longer than me. Tell me then, what did it used to be like?"

"You've got time?"

He looked around. There was hardly anybody else.

"Sure."

"Well, let me tell you, nothing's changed. Even that guy slumped over at the end of the bar. He's been there since before I started coming here I think."

"Really? I've always wondered how long he's been there."

"Perhaps it's me that's changed, you know? I used to hate coffee. I used to come here after school and sit down in this same spot and write in my notebook. I'd write these little stories about kids who'd run away and go on wild adventures."

"Huh, do you remember any?"

"I'll try." I sipped my coffee and finished the eggs first.

"Once upon a time, there was a girl who had a mother and a father that loved her very much. Everything a little girl could have wanted, she had, that is, two loving parents and a warm home to be loved in. Every day after school, they'd walk her home together from school. They often stopped by at the market to buy food for the evening. She ran around and poked things. Picking up this or that exotic fruit so that she could put it down again and pick up another one. She pressed her face against the glass to watch the fish resting on ice. Sometimes, she thought she could see them move. She memorized all the names of the places the food came from. Mangoes from Mexico, Tilapia from Indonesia, Kiwis from New Zealand, Salmon from Norway, and so on.

'What have you seen?' she would ask all the food. Mackerel from Spain stared back at her, eyes-wide as if having seen too much, and didn't say anything. In fact, none of the food ever responded to her. 'Hmph,' she goes, 'guess I'll have to find out for myself.'

And so, leaving the market, she would stare out at the distant mountain range that disappeared into the haze and she

longed to see what was beyond them. What foreign cities bustling with strange people speaking strange tongues, caravans across endless deserts set to entrancing rhythm, to take in the breathtaking panoramas at sunset of colours she's never seen before. It occurs to her fleetingly, how beautiful her own hometown is. That perhaps one day she might miss it, and that faraway children like her dream too of seeing what sights lay here. But like all such childish fleeting thoughts, they are only the seeds of turmoil that need not be worried about yet. Such thoughts as how all happiness is transient, how all passions at one moment bear the weight of the world and at another seem simply silly. Such ponderances as when she looks back at the vagrant beggar who her parents turn their nose at, and she wonders, what's so different about them?

Perhaps one day these ponderances might take root and consume her, for better or worse. In the mean time, she lets herself be carried by the currents of curiosity.

One day she slips away from her parents and runs over to ask the poor man, most sincerely, 'What have you seen?'

He stares back at her like Mackerel from Spain. 'I'll tell you for a dollar,' he says and breaks into a grin.

She digs into her pocket and finds the dollar her parents gave her to buy whatever she liked. He takes it with both hands and slips it deep into his coat pocket. Then, he laughs.

'Okay, now you have to tell me,' she demands.

'No I don't,' he says, still grinning.

'That's no fair!'

'Exactly.'

'But you promised me you'd tell me!'

'You see?'

She cried as her parents found and dragged her away, scolding her all the way home.

The end."

I finished my toast which was soggy and cold already.

"Oh come on, isn't there more to the story? What happens when she grows up?"

"Well I didn't know yet when I wrote it. I got to that point in the story and couldn't think of what to write next."

"Do you know now?"

"No."

The waiter sighed as he turned around to polish a glass.

"Maybe she stays and lives a quiet life in her hometown. She meets somebody who she loves with all her heart, and raises three beautiful children who she loves with all her heart and more. She patiently takes care of her aging parents as they once did for her. And one day, surrounded by

familiar faces, she dies, peacefully, still wondering what's out there past the mountain haze."

The waiter stopped polishing. He knitted his brow, as if to inspect a blemish in the glass.

"Or maybe, she does run away to see the world. Despite her parents who beg her to tell them what they did wrong, why she would want to leave them, and she won't know how to explain, only that she wishes they would understand. She goes everywhere, does everything, meets countless people. She sees all sorts of beautiful and terrible things, feels ecstasy and pain like she's never felt before. She meets yet more people, with only the faint but growing premonition that, one day, she will have say 'see you later,' but it won't be true. She will recall those days past, poking at fish and staring at mountain ranges, through a melancholy fog woven from the same thread as that which obscured these distant travels in her youth. Without even realizing it, she will find that the summit is behind her and that the trail is, has been, descending. As if she had been playing outside all day, and finally looks up to find that the sun has already set. All the cities will sound the same. All the people will act the same. All the sunsets will look the same. The seeds that had grown dazzlingly bright petals eventually wilt, so quietly giving way to a more subdued beauty. To the countless people she's met, she will bid farewell. When at last her youthful energy runs out, she longs for sweet rest. So, she commences the return to her hometown, a journey that she realizes had begun far before she had finally acknowledged it. Laden with the weight of the world, she passes old street signs,

shuttered storefronts, battered fences and hollowed out trees, mundane vestiges of the past she cannot relive. In a home much smaller than she remembers, she finds her parents by that same fireplace where so many fantastical stories of heroic journeyers were washed down with warm glasses of milk. And past the tears in her eyes, the parents can see that the girl who ran away so many years ago has transformed into somebody unrecognizable. But inside there somewhere, they trust that it's still the same child standing at their doorstep, coming home from a long-day's adventure with a scraped knee and a runny nose, who could want nothing more than tender kisses and a warm supper.