Oakely, Atop and Over and Odd Mountain

Oakely neared the crest of the massive, rounded hilltop, which was now densely blanketed by an unnatural fog.

From what direction had he ascended? Had he travelled in a straight line the entire way up, as was his intent, or veered off unknowingly in one strange manner or another? He didn’t know, and never, when ascending this particular hill, had he ever fully known. It was not for mortal men to know with true certainty, he believed, given its nature.

On one trip, he had even unwittingly descended the hill along the precise route he had just come up – through his own wide boot prints in fact, though the time that had elapsed between that ascent and the subsequent descent could not have allowed for it, in the mortal realm.

This hill did not exist in the mortal realm, however, but at the intersection of several. It was one of a handful in his own world that did so. Navigating slopes of this sort was never his strong point, a fact which the other guild engineers had always found satisfactorily entertaining. Engineers had blunt senses of humour – this was commonly known.

Oakely felt that gravitational anomalies in these unnatural places had unavoidable and disorienting effects on the mind. Elmur, his closest friend since they were both seven (how many decades ago that was, he’d long ago forgotten), claimed you could smell your way entirely over its crest, by observing the quality of the air, in all its nuances. The odours of the plants and animals, of course, were the easiest to discern (so Elmur claimed), but more important still, was the underlying aroma of the earth itself.

Considering what one could come to know of the known worlds’ distinctive seasonal cycles, these all could inform you of which direction through both place and possibility you were heading.

Presumably.

Elmur, it must be said, had the grandest, most impressive nose of any engineer Oakely had ever met, so it was small wonder he would say that.

In their youth, the friends had always taken to comparing personal characteristics, assigning numerical values to each, so as to measure which of the two was the best person. Valuations of body parts deemed to be of the most practical value were naturally their first rubrics. Elmur would score points for his nose every time, despite Oakely’s continuous and failed attempts to develop the size and capabilities of his own (a secret project which he would never admit to anyone that he had tried, or how).

Every aspect of their physical selves – and, as they grew older, aspects of their characters, when they came to recognize they had those as well – factored into the complex formulas they would devise and revise regularly, to calculate their respective scores in all of the relevant categories. In this way, they could effectively track who was the best, from one season to the next.

Some of the notable categories the friends came up with over the years included:

* First to kiss a girl (Oakley, by the age of 15, no contest)
* Longest time spent standing in one spot (They stopped scoring this one in their early twenties, once Oakely finally admitted that he could never, ever best Elmur at standing still)
* Most well-travelled engineer (Neither would become an engineer until they were much older, but once they had, Oakely won this every year, due in large part to his problem with standing still)
* Longest possible lifespan (Elmur, by about 25 to 27 years)
* Longest probable lifespan (they could never fully agree on a means of calculating this, but it remained an important topic of discussion)

There were many other categories adopted, modified, and retired over the years, including a few they did not openly discuss with others, or commit to print, being gentlemen of sorts.

They never stopped questioning and tweaking their formulas – which naturally became more complex and obscure as their mutual understanding of mathematics and astrology grew – and of course never once thought to question the value of the practice itself. To an engineer, Life and Measurement are very nearly the same thing.

In the absence of any preternatural ability to find his way around by scent alone, Oakely had developed a personal technique over the years for navigating the areas surrounding nexuses and other hazards, which he simply referred to as his Force of Will. Force of Will involved praying regularly to a fictional god (whom, in service of the obvious pun, he called Will) for the presence of mind to stay on task and not get turned around by external distractions, self doubt, fatigue, or dark witchcraft.

He was also, as it happened, exceedingly stubborn in both body and mind, so fortunately his false and personal god Will was not without power, and often came through for him when called upon, despite not being (strictly speaking) present for any of it.

These Will-bound prayers were usually mumbled beneath his breath, to avoid attracting the attention or concern of creatures in the immediate area, and followed no formal conventions, as he reckoned there was little to no reason to go so far as creating those.

Many long minutes (or was it nearly an hour?) had passed now, and he sensed that he must be nearly over the crest, since the slowly swirling fog that forever cloaked the hill’s upper half was wrapped now so close and thick about him as to render his sense of time and place of little practical value. The ground was only discernible by vague details passing close by, on either side of his boots. He was, for all he knew, walking entirely in place, as a stream of pebbles, roots, and twigs slid past him, moving steadily away from the hill’s crest, perhaps having collectively decided it best to not be up there after all.

He stopped, then waited a moment for his sense of balance to return. The air here was nearly liquid, and cooler now. He felt lightly covered in a cloying mist both inside and out, and a heady scent of earth, pine and rock had begun to settle over and adhere to his clothes and hair.

Distant bird sounds, a slight whistle of wind through the evergreens, from a direction he could not discern – from all directions. He tugged absently on his travelling cap.

*Don’t stand here too long*, Will cautioned, you’ll get turned around again, somehow, but Oakely needed to stop and think for a minute or two, and so he did. Despite the stern warnings given all engineers regarding how not to linger this close to a nexus point, he wanted to observe the place for a short moment. The opportunity was too rare. He wished he could see and think well enough to take some proper notes.

There was something about the knot of world fabric gathered tightly in these places that gave the engineer a sensation of both standing utterly still, and also moving at an impossible speed, in all directions at once. An exhilarating vertigo, like an obscure clue to some obvious secret. This place had been waiting for him; it wanted to show him important things.

A mild wave of static trickled lightly over his skin, prickling the hair on his arms and neck, spreading down his spine, and outward, and everywhere. Every part of him was vibrating almost imperceptibly. He felt dense, but not heavy. Pinned gently in place. Comfortable.

*Wake up.*

Oakely was no longer breathing air at all, but only the fog, which felt now almost as thick as water, seeping into him, from the inside and out.

*You’ve been lured here.*

*Find the way down.*

*Oakely…*

His legs nearly sat him on the ground, then and there – an almost alarming notion – but a crow, somewhat below him and to the left (or was it right?), cawed loudly, four times; piercing sounds that jolted his thoughts back to the present moment, for the moment. His eyes (when had he closed those?) opened in an instant. He heard something large moving through the brush up ahead.

Oakely lurched himself forward, straining to reconnect his mind to the body he knew must still be there, and made haste in the call’s direction, trusting in Will to not lead him face-first into the stabbing needles of a pine tree, or stumbling into a foot-wrenching rut in the ground. He had regained use of his muscles, but now had no real idea in what direction he was moving. Faith was the only compass he had to guide him anyway, now that he was over the crest and heading downward again. The descent would be a gamble, he was sure – more uncertain given his inability to know by exactly how much he’d gotten turned around on the way up.

He whistled once, and was answered by another short call from the bird, still some distance away. He adjusted his course again, and crashed through the brush blindly, toward where the sound had come from. His senses were growing somewhat soft and featureless, like the smooth, clinging mist flowing around and over him. At this point, descent in any direction would be preferable to remaining any longer near the top. He had simply pressed his luck too far, being up here this long. The mountain wanted him to keep climbing forever.

There was a loud cracking sound very close by, and half-startled, Oakely pitched sideways, his leading foot going out from under him as he gave himself over to gravity, having no longer any firm notion of where up and down were located. He began to slide and then roll, seeing only blurred shapes spiraling past him through the pearly mist, as he tumbled between trees and over small rocks, gaining momentum quickly. He drew in his limbs as best he could, feeling and hearing objects in his pack and pockets jostling and breaking over one another.

The earth disappeared briefly from beneath him, and came back hard a moment later, knocking him breathless. Then he was, all at once, no longer in the fog.

Oakely waited a moment for his vision to clear, and the faint buzzing in his ears to subside. He coughed twice, expelling faint puffs of grayish vapor. He propped himself up on a bruised elbow, wincing at countless dull and sharp pains. He was sprawled on the ground, twenty feet from the shoreline of a large, tranquil, blue-green lake. Surrounding it in the distance and on all sides were ridge lines of mixed soft and hardwood trees, the latter already beginning to turn the vibrant colors of early Autumn. He had been expelled from a wall of mist and evergreens behind and slightly above him.

A large crow perched upon a man-sized rock at the water’s edge. Pulled up next to the rock was a sizable boat, with what looked like an old outboard steam engine slung off the back.

Oakely gathered himself up from the ground, regarded the crow, nodded once. “Thanks for that”. The crow looked him up and down. It was standing on one foot.

Oakely’s woolen cap was hanging low on his head. He removed it, wiped his brow, and took in the shoreline. The trees here were large.

The crow shifted to its other foot and blinked at him three times, rather rapidly.

Looking back to the slopes he had just descended, the engineer could no longer see the hill’s crest, where he had been standing, only a moment before. It was just fog, trees, and then more fog, giving way gradually to the blue sky above. It was impossible to see exactly where the mountain began, and where it came to an end. He wasn’t sure how he had made it down so quickly, without being broken or impaled on something during the descent. He reckoned that he must have fallen several hundred feet through the trees. There were bruises and scratches over his exposed skin in a hundred places, but he was, miraculously, still in one piece.

The engineer looked down at the cap held in his hands. Was it… thicker than when he had put it on this morning? He looked back to the large crow, who was still regarding him sternly with the side of its head.

“I think I’ve shrunk a little”, he said.

The crow’s eye was a black orb, and it neither confirmed nor denied that he had, or had not, changed size. It seemed unnecessary to confirm it; everything here, now that Oakely had a chance to take a better look, did seem oddly large to him. His clothes were hanging off of his frame in a manner suggesting that he had, quite probably, shrunk to what he estimated to be 4/5ths of his former size.

“Can you take me to the Engineering Guild Hall?”. Oakely wished he had thought to draw a measurement line on his arm. He had read about this shrinking phenomenon in the books, but had not met anyone who had experienced it for themselves. What direction had he come down?

The crow regarded him for a moment, cocking its head this way and that, and then spread its wings and hopped onto the boat’s bow. Oakely didn’t feel like spending any more time here than necessary, and so walked around to the back of the boat, giving the crow a respectful distance, and tossed his rucksack in. He hauled the craft from the shore, his loose, heavy pant legs dragging behind him in the water, and then, somewhat awkwardly, rolled himself over the side and into the thing. This sent the boat bobbing gently to and fro as it slowly drifted away from the lake’s shore. The crow’s wings flapped as it shifted to maintain its balance at the front.

Oakely soon had the engine stoked, and they began to churn toward the middle of the lake, trailing a puffy grey cloud of ash as they went. By the time they had reached halfway to the lake’s centre, the engineer was beginning to have trouble seeing over the gunnels, and he had to remove his old vest, heavy shirt, and boots to avoid getting tangled up in them. His pants were huge now. He was still shrinking, and rather quickly. He bundled his things at the bottom of the boat for bedding, and lay down, gazing upward through the wispy ash plumes.

The sky above was a clear, brilliant blue, and the sun was at its zenith now, staring down at them harshly. There was a single, fluffy white cloud lazily drifting along, high above the lake, as though on a solitary pilgrimage to wherever clouds go when they decide to finally question their life’s purpose, and then set off looking for answers. *Good luck with that*, thought Oakely, eyelids beginning to grow heavier.

The engineer needed to sleep. He needed to find a place to sleep. He didn’t know how small he would be by the time he found a place to sleep.

The crow looked like a great, black eagle to him now, and the engineer idly wondered when it had eaten last. *Maybe I should feed him soon*, he thought, trying not to sound too concerned in his own mind. The crow looked at him indignantly. Or so he felt. Crows were hard to read; they always looked bothered by what they were witnessing. What were they witnessing? Did he want to know?

Then all at once, things went darker.