

The Warden at the Gate

His daughter left through the east gate at the start of summer.

She had a small pack and a blue scarf. She said she would be back before the rains. They parted at the east gate, and he watched her walk down the road. She did not look back. He watched her until she grew smaller, then smaller, then gone.

After that, he came to the gate every day.

At first he came early, before the traders. He stood where she had stood. He watched. He searched the faces of everyone arriving.

The rains came and went. Weeks went by. Then months.

People learned why he was there. They nodded to him as they passed. Some spoke to him. Most did not. He did not mind.

One morning the guard did not come. The captain said, "You are always here anyway. You're the new warden if you want." He took the keys.

At first, nothing changed. He still looked only at the far road. The coming and going of others meant little. He measured the day by who did not arrive.

In time, he learned the traders. He learned the pilgrims. He learned their names. From their stories, he learned much of the world beyond the gate. When merchants argued over routes, they asked him. When a family wondered where to send their son, they spoke with him.

There were days when the gate opened and no one passed through. On those days he swept the stones, oiled the hinges, and watched from the shade.

Years went by.

A woman asked him if he was expecting someone.

He said, "I was."

She asked, "Do you still?"

He did not answer.

Later, a boy who was leaving the city for the first time asked him what lay beyond the gate.

He said, "An endless road."

The boy asked if people came back.

He said, "Some do."

One evening as daylight diminished, a traveler asked why he guarded the gate with such faithful devotion.

He thought of the scarf.
He thought of the gate.
He thought of the road.
He thought of all those he now knew.

Finally he answered,
“For me, at this gateway, love ended — and also began.”

— *William Zeitler*
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