

The Wayward Gift

girl once found a ragged man at the forest's edge,

hungry, limping, and shunned by all.

The villagers hissed warnings:

He is a thief, a shadow, a fool.

You will regret your kindness.

But she gave him food from her pack anyway,

and bound his wounds with strips of her own cloak.

When he asked to walk beside her,

she said yes, though unease stirred in her heart.

For many days they traveled,

and she began to hope her mercy was not folly.

But when they reached the narrow mountain pass,

where she had long sought to bring her sacred gift,

the man betrayed her.

He stole the gift and vanished into the crags,

leaving her with empty hands and broken trust.

She staggered homeward, grief-struck,

while the village mocked her soft heart.

Mercy is wasted on the unworthy, they said.

Now you see.

Years passed. She lived quietly,

her quest abandoned,

her heart still tender but scarred.

She never knew what became of the thief.

Meanwhile, far from the village,

the thief lost his way in the wilderness.

Starving, half-mad,

he stumbled upon a hidden monastery.

The monks took him in, asking nothing.

There, he found a silence that would not let him hide,

and the chants at dawn pierced him deeper than any blade.

The thief himself,

slowly, painfully,

became someone else.

He became the one who rang the bell at dawn,

the one welcoming wanderers at the gate.

the first to volunteer for the lowliest chores,

In time, he became the one they called Abbot.

He tried many times to find the girl,
to return her gift.
But when he had first stumbled upon the monastery,
he had been so lost with cold and hunger
that afterward he could never retrace his steps.

And so the sacred gift he had stolen
was folded into their worship,
woven into their daily prayers
until it seemed it had always belonged there.

The girl never knew.

Her kindness had been betrayed,
her quest undone,
her name forgotten in the village.

Yet her mercy lived on in ways
she could not have foreseen,
and her offering, carried by another's hands,
fulfilled her vow — her intention — more completely
than if she had succeeded.

For such is the hidden way of grace:
what we lose may ripen elsewhere.
And we plant seeds
whose harvest may not be ours to see.

— *William Zeitler*
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