

The Shepherd of Souls

Once upon a time there was a shepherd named Lior,
who lived happily in the mountains
with his wife and young son.

Their life was simple and hard.
Yet they had each other,
and their sheep,
and the mountains and valleys were so beautiful —
beautiful beyond words.

One day Lior came home after grazing their flock,
only to discover there had been an avalanche.
Where his cottage had stood
now lay a gash of rocks and debris.

His home and family were gone without a trace —
swallowed by the mountainside.
All that was left was a newborn lamb,
whom his wife and son had been caring for,
who had somehow survived.
He named her Flower.

After that, Lior lived as one half-alive.
He cared for Flower and his sheep,
spoke little,
and slept by a fire that burned low
in a simple hut he built
near where his cottage had been.

The villagers left him food but no questions.
“He’s already part ghost,” they whispered.

One clear winter’s night,
Lior was foraging for firewood
when a blizzard took him by surprise.
Snow whirled so thick
that Up and Down traded places.

Disoriented, he stumbled and fell into a drift,
and the cold overcame him quickly.
His heartbeat quieted, faltering.

In that stillness,
he saw two figures in the blinding whiteness —
his wife and son — smiling, patient.
They didn’t beckon him closer;

they simply waited as if to say not yet.
Their peace startled him awake.

At dawn, he crawled out of the snowdrift —
alive and aching.

Near him, wedged between stones,
lay an old shepherd's flute
carved of mountain ash, crusted with ice.

He didn't know who had left it there,
only that it felt at home in his hands.

At first, he couldn't make a sound with it.
Eventually, notes came out, cracked and wind-torn.
Over the long days of watching his sheep,
he let the flute slowly show him what it wanted to sing.
Sometimes he wondered who was playing whom.

The villagers noticed
the shepherd who had never smiled
now played in the twilight —
and the sheep gathered close
as if listening to prayer.

He played through sun and rain,
through silence so wide
the echoes seemed to open into forever.
The sheep learned to follow the sound;
the birds grew unafraid.
And in time,
his own heart began to keep time
with the otherworldly music.

When the fever came to the village,
Lior came, carrying herbs and his flute.

"Sometimes compassion is the only medicine left," he said.

He played for the sick,
for the frightened,
for the dying.
His songs sang of sorrow to tenderness,
and from tenderness to a strange, fierce joy.

Some who heard it survived.
Those who didn't, passed away loved.

When Flower too fell ill,
he played through the night.
The flute's tone raw — human, pleading.

When at last her small body stilled,
the wind rose and carried the fading melody
down the valley like a benediction.

At dawn, he carried Flower
to where his family had died,
and laid her to rest
in a small grave adorned with stones.

Weeks later, the fever took Lior.
On his last evening,
he asked the villagers to open the window,
so the wind could find him.

They buried him next to Flower,
his flute resting on his chest.

That spring,
when storms swept down the valley,
the wind carried music — faint, but unmistakable.

It was never quite the same tune twice.

The villagers called it Lior's Song.
And when someone died, they would say,

"Listen — Lior has come to carry them home."

Lior had become a shepherd of souls, not of sheep.

— *William Zeitler*
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