

Into the West

His name had been forgotten long ago, left behind with the other remnants of his past. He had lived too long. He knew that.

He should have died when she had.

The years before her were unremarkable, the years with her in them an endless blur of joy. He'd had sorrow and pain in those years, but her presence wrapped around them and infused them, dulling their sharpness and softening their edges until he could think of those he'd lost without grief.

Except that he'd also lost her, and that grief would never leave him.

He still remembered her dying cry. She had called his name, screamed for him with such pain in her voice that he had screamed with her. They had fallen into the darkness together.

He had awakened alone.

Sometimes he still dreamed of it. His eyes opened to reveal the shattered room, the bodies of his tormentors lying limply about. A moment of terror had been supplanted by joy, for now he was free. Then he had tried to call to her, to tell her the joyful news, and the terror had returned.

Where her presence had been, now was only emptiness. Where she had warmed him, all he could feel was cold. Her laughter had vanished, and with it his own, never to return.

She was gone.

He had left that place and begun to walk, aimlessly, endlessly, wandering streets and lanes with no thought of where he was going, no thought except the absence of thought that was her loss. Some instinct must have driven him to find food, to avoid those who might hinder him, to seek places to warm himself as the winter came on. He remembered nothing from that time, and he preferred it that way.

He had no way to mark the passage of years since those days. His hair had been entirely white since that awakening, and he never looked at his own face even on the rare occasions he entered a place with a mirror. He knew that he could not bear to see his eyes as they were now, without the visible signs of her love.

There were times he wondered why he kept going. Why not end it? Why continue this mockery of living?

But he knew the answer. He had thought such things once before, and she had come in answer to those thoughts. If he were to think them again, and she not come, he might lose what sanity remained to him.

Better to endure, and wait until time and the world's way united them once more.

Better to move on, towards the setting sun.

Far away, nearby, in a cottage by the sea, a woman hung sheets to dry on a clothesline. The wind caught the ones already hanging and billowed them out like flags, or sails on a fine brisk day. She smiled a little and held her basket tighter until the wind died down.

Though she moved with care, though her hair was white, she remembered fewer years than her face and body might say. A girl was to be married on the morrow, and the woman who now pinned a sheet to the line was but twenty years older than that girl. Her sister, rather than the mother most assumed, she had raised the girl from infancy and loved her more than she loved any other.

Any other, save one.

One who now was gone, and had been for many years.

She had felt him die. Illness had grasped her, shaken her to her marrow, and in her fear she had called his name. His pain-filled cry had answered hers, and she had found him and clung to him. Together they had fallen into endless night.

And in that night, her love had vanished from within her grasp, never to return.

She had never expected to waken in this world, and for a time she had railed at those who had called her back to life, but gradually she came to accept it. Her place was here, where it had always been, among those who still loved her and respected what she had lost, and those who had needed her help to accomplish a great task, ridding the world of a terrible evil.

Sometimes, in these later days, she still thought of him and wept, but more often now she smiled with pride, for his last act had been revenge

against those who had kept them apart. With his dying breath, he must have spoken a curse, for the place where they had taken him was destroyed utterly, and all who were in the room likewise destroyed. His own body was never found, but he had been in the center of the destruction. It was only to be expected.

So they all said, at any rate.

She still hoped, somewhere deep within her heart.

High, sweet notes from a pipe flung into her ears, borne on the sea wind, the same wind that now filled her sheets. Breathing deep of it, she began to sing, thinking of him.

*Lay down
Your sweet and weary head*

She gazed towards the sun, now reddening all the sky and ocean.

*Night is falling
You have come to journey's end*

One arm described a graceful circle.

*Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before*

Stepping around the clothesline, she started towards the cliff that looked upon the sea.

*They are calling
From across the distant shore*

She touched her own face, unsurprised to find it wet

*Why do you weep?
What are these tears upon your face?*

Brushing the salt drops away, she stepped to the edge of the cliff.

*Soon you will see
All of your fears will pass away*

She lifted her hands to the darkening sky.

*Safe in my arms
You're only sleeping*

Exultation rose in her voice.

*What can you see on the horizon?
Why do the white gulls call?*

She half-turned to see the silver crescent already in the skies.

*Across the sea a pale moon rises
The ships have come to carry you home*

Gazing down at the water, she let her singing grow soft.

*And all shall turn to silver glass
A light on the water
Gray ships pass*

She turned away from the cliff and started back towards her home. There was much to do before the morning.

*Hope fades
Into the world of night*

Looking up, she could see the first stars starting to peer out.

*Through shadows falling
Out of mystery and time*

She gazed out over the plain, for once wishing with all her heart for the impossible.

*Don't say
We have come now to the end*

A glance back at the sea.

*White shores are calling
You and I will meet again*

She glanced at the cottage, then turned away. One more moment, time enough to finish the song, could hurt nothing.

*And you'll be here in my arms
Just sleeping*

She threw herself into a whirl, as she might have to a child's coaching in years gone by, her arms rising until they cradled the moon above her head.

*What can you see on the horizon?
Why do the white gulls call?*

Her spin slowed until she was moving slowly forward, across the level ground all silvered by the moonlight.

Across the sea a pale moon rises

She stopped beside the billowing sheets and held the post of the clothesline as she might a mast.

The ships have come to carry you home

Smiling, she raised a hand to her eyes, to shade them and keep better lookout.

And all will turn to silver glass

A shadow moved nearby, black topped with the color of her song. Her smile vanished, her heart shook within her, but she sang still.

*A light on the water
All souls pass...*

She drew breath sharply as the shadow moved into the light and became a man. "How have you come here?" she demanded. "Why do you come? Name yourself."

"I cannot," the man answered, in a voice hoarse as from disuse. "I do not remember it."

"Why come here, then?"

"I do not know. I know only that I was called. Called towards the sunset, and the ocean, and the end of the world." He stepped closer to her. "You were singing. Is your song done?"

"Not...quite." Oh, but she knew him, knew every line of his body, every beat of his heart, the heart she had thought forever stilled, and by the quickening of his breath, he knew her and longed for her as she for him. But some things must yet be fulfilled.

"Then finish it."

She lifted her head and sang the final words.

Into the West...

The evenstar shone down upon them, and the waves rolled upon the white shores. And they flew then to one another's arms, and pain and sorrow fell away from them, and their love sprang forth as green as the country beneath the swift sunrise.