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FEBRUARY 2012
2,000 WORDS

SISYPHUS

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SISYPHUS / JOEL ALLYN

As always, the boulder rolled down the hill and once more, after a short reprieve, Sisyphus descended and attempted to roll the stone to the top again. He no longer wept when the inevitable came.

It was hot. His clothes had all withered away thousands of years before and so he was naked, and still it was so hot. It felt as though his flesh was on fire and yet, as he looked around he saw that the hill he pushed the boulder up was covered in lush tall grass and nestled in endless spring. There were purple and red flowers in bloom, swaying in a gentle breeze. He felt no breeze, and could smell nothing. He was drenched in sweat and his hands were more blisters than flesh.

Every time he pushed the massive boulder upward, slow step by slower step, he thought over his life. Things done and things left undone. Things which would have been better left undone. He wished he could remember the good things and that which brought him pleasure and joy. More than once he tried to steer his thoughts, to reminisce of childhood or his first love or even a sunset but succeeded only briefly. The focal point of his thoughts seemed to dwell around the negative acts he had committed and the virtuous ones he had not. No other thoughts were permitted. His memory was his tormentor, his apt mind his foe.

About a third of the way up, he hit a moist patch and lost his footing. The boulder rolled back slightly and when he attempted to push it, the sweat caused his palms to slip on the stone and the boulder almost rolled over him. Dropping to one knee he forced his shoulder into the rolling stone, halting its descent. He resembled Atlas, his broad shoulders alone supporting the weight of the world. Slowly, with great strain and care, he stood back up and after catching his breath, continued pushing the boulder up the hill.

As always, the memories came in droves, like a swarm of angry bees, and they stung. The pain was a familiar one, and yet each scar was opened anew and with each laceration he swore he had never experienced such agony.

Once, an eternity ago, he passed a beggar in the marketplace whose face looked familiar to him and even as the man called out his brother's name, Sisyphus did not turn. Instead he quickened his pace and went on through the crowd until he came to a dark alley shielded from the light, where he fell to his knees and wept. The tears darkened the earth beneath him.

When his first wife lay dying of a painful illness, the thought came to him more than once to hasten her end. Not as a mercy, but in order that he may at last be rid of her and be free to welcome his mistress into the house. He saw his wife die a thousand gasping deaths on that hill, and each time was the first time.

Every time he at last moved beyond the image of his wife's face, the visage of his first-mistress-turned-second-wife appeared. With a cruel clarity he saw her cold body dangling, with dripping wrists and broken neck, swaying from the rafters. Beside her his new mistress, their cook, who she had murdered. One of his second wife's sandals had fallen to the floor to rest alongside his new mistress' bare feet. He took both of them, before taking them both and burying them in secret atop a grassy hill. His shame was such a weight, that it seemed a second hunk of granite bound to his neck.

The boulder's weight increased exponentially as he pushed it closer and closer to the top. To the end. Time was not an issue and all questions were ripped from his mind before he had time to understand their query. There were still many jagged edges upon the massive rock which had refused to be smoothed over by the wheel of time. As Sisyphus pushed ever upward, his palms raw, the points dug in hard and would pop the blisters. He kept on, leaving wet splotches of white and red on the grey stone. His shoulders howled for him to stop and his arms and legs had already begun to shake, much earlier than normal.

More than anger and less than hope welled in him and a fire was sparked. Instead of stepping aside and letting the stone roll away as he had done countless times before, he felt a new sense of determination and struggled on. Though Sisyphus had long ago abandoned his naïve hopes for redemption, he was possessed by a strange certainty that this was it. Then and there he knew he would not give in, no matter the pain or duress or if it broke all that he was. He was already a splintered man and was amazed to think that despite the outcome, this could be the last time.

I cannot say he did it without flinching, but nonetheless he faced the memories which came next with his head up and his feet firmly on the ground.

There was a child, a girl, with the first mistress, the second wife. He never cared for children but decided to do right by the wife he wronged and, as he saw it, killed. For seven months he raised the girl, stumbling along but managing to make his way, pushing on, convincing himself that what he felt for her was love. However, his inexperience was his undoing.

One day while fetching water he placed the child in the shallow basin to play and turned his attention from her, for only the briefest of moments he swore to all who would listen, and louder to those who would not. The briefest moment was enough time to snuff out the child's fragile flame.

Awful as all this was, far worse was that not a week after he'd buried the girl, beside her mother atop the grassy hill, he found himself glad she was gone. He remembered this sickening realization over and over with a concentrated disdain. Each time he recalled cradling his wet, still warm yet still dead daughter, he felt the same helplessness, the pang of guilt and sorrow. Then he remembered how he refused to speak her name and turned her into 'the dead girl', then later just 'the girl' and then even later, dismissed as nothing, less than a whisper.

The rage he felt with himself helped muster the strength to push the weight of eternity on and on, and as sweat streamed from every pore he wept and screamed and went on. That fury fueled his ancient quivering muscles. For a brief stretch he felt like a god, and somehow managed to get almost to a slow walk when the boulder struck something and came to a dead stop.

At first, poor Sisyphus dreamed that somehow he'd finally reached the end of his torment, his justice. That the top had been crested and that the rock had come to a rest, but as he

removed his hand the stone still rolled back towards him. Now that the rush of adrenaline had passed, the great burden nearly crushed him. When they hit each other like sumo wrestlers he stumbled back a few steps, surprised at how much heavier it was, and then dug his toes deep into the soft earth and attempted to hold the weight back with his outstretched arms.

The rock's momentum, small though it was, was enough to get past his weakened limbs, but not quite enough to knock him over. He again dropped down upon the grass, but not on his knees. Instead he leaned so far forward that he was almost lying on his belly in the grass. He pushed off hard, digging in and kicking mounds of wet earth aside and then rammed his shoulder against the stone, leaving nasty gashes where several of the small points dug in and rubbed the faded flesh raw.

Sweating, crying and bleeding, Sisyphus pushed on.

When he struck the object which stopped him before, he grunted, held his breath, and then shoved harder and harder, reclaiming his upright position in slight degrees, he forced the boulder up over the small obstacle. Something gave beneath the weight of the massive rock and he heard a crunch. Looking down, he saw white pieces of bone scattered through the grass and knew it was the skull of a small animal. He knew what kind of animal it was too, but that memory was far below him now and he would not dwell upon it any longer. He faced it before he faced his wife, before his mistress and the mistress after, before the terrible atrocities he'd committed during his young adulthood, but after the minor misdeeds of his youth. That was where that skull belonged, that was its place and he had moved beyond it. Part of the skull fragments pierced his bare feet, and instead of flinch or attempt to extract them he pressed his foot down harder. Compared to the memories the pain was a relief.

Upward, ever upward, more and more weight piled on with each step, and still he kept on.

The hill gets steeper nearer to the top, and finally he sensed the ground's angle begin to shift under him until it felt like he was pushing the rock up a wall. A desperate shadow of a smile crossed his face as he pleaded that this time, he may get there, and rest. More than that, he hoped he could just reach the top without reaching the memory he knew awaited him before it.

He never reached the memory before. The stone always rolled back down before then. Still, he knew.

A vile defeating thought infected his mind. Letting go was still an option. There was still the chance to just back away from the weight and give up. Yet he knew better, knew that even as it rested at the bottom of the hill he still felt the boulder's crushing weight. Sisyphus, with skin raw and shredded, with blistered hands sticky with blood and puss, having stared into eternity for twice as long, pushed beyond anywhere he had dared before and weary as he was, continued upward.

When it hit him, it was worse than all the others put together and the torture was indescribable. Physical pain was but a mercy. He would have much rather been flayed and made to push a boulder ten times larger and covered in needles and broken glass, and been grateful for it. If only to avoid facing the thing he had buried away even from himself. It lay in a hollow mute

cesspool flooded with impenetrable darkness, where all light is devoured and all sound is drowned.

He was a monster staring into the abyss, and the abyss also stared into him.

His eyes closed and for the first time, he remembered.

Their father told the boys that she was making them leave. He told Sisyphus and his younger brother that the only way for them to keep their home and their friends and indeed their lives, was for her to lose hers.

She was in the field, tied to a tree atop a hill where their father had left her. While the children saw to his wife, the father went into town to be seen, and to guarantee as many as possible saw him, he was in his cups. When the boys reached her and she saw their eyes and the object her oldest held, she began to weep and plead and curse their father. She rambled on about what the boys assumed was nonsense regarding their father's affairs and her plan of taking them away to be safe from him. Something was said about him touching them and Sisyphus couldn't stand anymore and so, filled with the rage and recklessness of youth he struck her hard with the club and what had been her jaw went slack and crooked.

The shock of seeing what he did, what he was capable of doing, left him frozen in place and as his mother howled and bled he remained still, and silent. He wanted to take it back, he believed her, loved her, and needed her. He failed her, but he did not kill her.

After his yelling did nothing, his brother grabbed the hardwood club from his loose grip and did what Sisyphus could not. Still, he'd struck the first blow, the one that sealed her fate, and theirs.

Bawling like a baby and feeling as though he were moving Mt Olympus itself, Sisyphus summoned all that was left in him. The entirety of all that he was and had ever been, every ounce of love, hate, sweat, blood, memories, regrets, fears and fantasies. Screaming to the stars, he channeled it all and gave a final mighty shove, releasing everything he had, everything he was. The boulder rolled from his fingers, over one final hump, then it was still.

He let go of the weight. It did not fall back upon him.

He kept his hand hovering, shaking, over the face of the stone for a time, certain the second he believed it was truly motionless it would roll again. His legs gave out and he fell to the ground shaking. Sisyphus crawled around the stone to see what waited, half expecting there to be another hill atop this one or some other cruel joke. There atop the grassy hill, were several graves marked only with worn sticks surrounded by various sized piles of white stones. One grave, marked with a short pristine stick had only a small pile of pebbles. He knew his three lovers rested below, beside his daughter and mother. Beside their graves was a twisted and splintered branch stuck at the head of a place open for him, marked now with the great boulder.

Sisyphus pulled himself toward the end. Despite his weariness, it was not so hard to do. There was no weight to drag along through the grass that now felt cool on his skin. He felt the soft breeze too, and carried on the wind was the scent of flowers. He smiled.

Rest came, at long last.