

“Hand me a couple more of those glass angels, will you, darling ?”

Valerie and Heather were decorating the Christmas tree.

“We need to make it specially nice for Grandpa,” Heather said, rather solemnly.

“We certainly do. I’m afraid it will be the last time he sees a Christmas tree.”

“Does he know he is going to die soon ?”

“Yes.”

“And can’t Daddy do anything for him ?”

“He can’t cure him, I’m afraid. He can just give him tablets to make him a bit more comfortable.”

Valerie paused in her work, deciding that she needed to concentrate on preparing her daughter for what was to come.

“You’ll notice that Grandpa has changed quite a bit since the last time you saw him. He’s lost a lot of weight. And he gets tired very quickly. He has a lot of pain in his stomach, even when he takes the tablets. So we mustn’t do anything which tires him out even more.”

“I’m going to write a story for him,” Heather announced.

“That’s a nice idea, darling,” Valerie said, sounding a bit cautious. “Would you like to tell me what it’s about ?”

“Yes,” Heather said, firmly. “It’s called the Birthday Stone.” She walked across to one of the bookcases and picked up a flat, fairly round stone she had placed there earlier. “Look,” she said. “I shall have to write the date of Grandpa’s birthday on it.”

“Ah,” Valerie said. “Yes, I’d seen that. I was wondering where it had come from.”

“I found it in the summer on one of our school Nature Walks. It feels lovely and smooth in your hand. Try it.”

Valerie did so, aware of what a pleasant sensation it was to hold it.

“And this is what your story is about, is it ?”

“Yes. It goes like this:

When the Traveller reached the shore he was helped out of the boat by a man with a beard, who was wearing a long cloak. The man smiled at him, and waved graciously at the boatman, who was already starting to take the boat back across the water.

The man reached inside his cloak and then handed a flat, round stone to the Traveller, saying:

“This is your Birthday Stone. You must look after it very carefully. Place it in your pocket, and do not take it out or look at it until you are told to do so at the end of your journey. If you find that you are getting tired, or if you are in any pain, place your hand round the stone in your pocket and ask for help to make you feel better. But only do this when you are in discomfort, do not hold the stone the whole time. You will find that there is water to drink on your journey, but there is nothing to eat until you arrive at the end. So if you start to feel hungry and weak, and it is difficult for you to go on climbing, place your hand on the stone and ask for enough strength to help you onwards.”

The man paused, surveying the Traveller.

“Perhaps it would be a good idea for you to take a stick,” he said. “The path goes uphill for quite a bit of the way, though it never gets very steep.”

The traveller accepted the stick without protesting. He knew that, at his age, it would be silly to pretend that he didn’t need it.

“Good,” the man said, as the Traveller took the stick. He had a very peaceful and calm voice, and the Traveller felt no anxiety about the journey he was to take. “I have told

you everything you need to know. You must start your journey now, so that you can arrive at the same time as the others. Remember what I have told you about the stone, it is very important. Place your hand on it now, so that they know you are starting out.”

The Traveller did as he was told. He felt at ease, and eager to set off.

“Good luck,” the man said to him. “The path is easy to follow.”

And having said this, the man turned away, satisfied that he had done what he needed to do to enable the Traveller to begin his journey.

The path went gently uphill, and by walking at a slow but steady pace the Traveller found that he could keep going without having to stop to regain his breath. The earth was quite bare at the beginning, but it was not long before the hillside became much greener. The Traveller saw that there were primroses and other early spring flowers growing beside the path. Good, he thought, I’ve arrived at the start of things. As the path curved round to the right he was able to see the water again without turning round to look back, which he knew he didn’t want to do. There was no sign of the boat which had brought him to the shore.

A little further on he became aware of the sound of animals. At first he was a little surprised, everything had seemed so quiet. But as he came round the side of the hill the path levelled out and he could see, stretching into the distance, meadows with cows and sheep grazing. There appeared to be vineyards beyond the meadows, where the land began to rise again - but they were rather far away, and the Traveller’s eyesight was not as good as it had been when he was younger.

A stream crossed the path, heading down towards the meadows. On the slope above the right of the path it dropped from one stone to another, and the Traveller saw that it was completely clear. As he bent towards it he heard, or thought he heard, a voice similar to that of the man on the shore - only somehow deeper, with more authority, saying “Yes, go on, it’s safe to drink. You need to take some refreshment.”

The Traveller stood up straight again, still not sure whether he heard the voice or imagined it, but knowing that he felt fresher and stronger. He knew also that it was time to move on, though part of him wanted to sit and enjoy the scene because it was so peaceful and restful. The path became a little steeper as he made his way onwards, and for the first time he had to stop to recover his strength. The pain in his side, which had not troubled him so far, was beginning to remind him that it was part of him. He thought of placing his hand round the stone, then told himself that it was only a small problem and that he could easily live with it if he concentrated on thinking about something else.

He kept going for another few minutes, trying to distract himself by naming as many of the plants by the path as he could; but after a while he knew that he was fighting a battle which he couldn’t win. Or that he couldn’t win on his own, given his age. The pain had become sharper, he was finding it difficult to breathe normally, and he was beginning to feel a little dizzy. He reached for the stone, comforted by its smoothness. The voice came to him again, telling him that he could sit by the side of the path for a few minutes until he felt better again. This is the most difficult bit, the voice suggested. It gets easier after this.

For a couple of minutes he felt dazed, unclear where he was. Then his vision and his sense of where he was returned. The pain had eased, and he felt ready to continue his journey.

Two minutes later the path levelled out again and the Traveller saw that, down to his right, there was a town. He could see the market square, and the way the streets led off from it. Because of his rather dim eyesight it was difficult for him to determine whether there really were people in the market square or whether he was imagining them, because a town cannot be real if nobody lives in it. Then a thought occurred to him - in a town this size surely there should be a church ? Or a mosque ? He looked again, trying to persuade himself that he could see one. But the Traveller had always been a truthful man. If there wasn’t one,

there wasn't one. And before he had time to try to work out why there wasn't one he heard the voice again, more distinctly this time, saying: "I don't need churches. Or any other kind of expensive buildings. The church is inside us."

The Traveller moved on, sensing that it would be a mistake to stay and try to unravel what this meant. The path turned sharply away from the town, and it was soon hidden from view. The scenery became less interesting for a while, but as the path was nearly level, he was able to go ahead almost at a marching pace. The clouds were starting to form around the hilltops, and he knew that he had to keep moving. The one notable thing he saw was a large lake, nestling at the base of the hills. The pain returned for a moment, but soon quietened down, and he felt no need to clasp the stone again.

Because there was now little to see, and because he had been walking for quite a time, the Traveller kept his head down, concentrating on the path. He had enjoyed walking all his life, and there was something very comforting about the rhythm which you get into when you have been walking for a couple of hours or more. So he was not expecting it when the path suddenly opened out on to a kind of plateau and he realised that, for the first time since he had left the boatman and the man on the shore, he was in the presence of other people.

He saw a long wooden table, with benches on either side of it. Some people were already seated at the table; others, like himself, were just arriving and trying to work out what they were supposed to be doing. Seeing others do so, the Traveller placed his stick on the ground and moved towards the table to take one of the vacant spaces; the person next to him, whom the Traveller judged to be several years older than him, smiled pleasantly. Soon, all the places were occupied; the Traveller noticed, to his surprise, that some of the people seated at the table were quite young. He counted a total of eleven other people.

"Good. You've all done well to get here."

The Traveller looked up, recognising the voice which he had heard more than once on his journey. He saw, or thought he saw, a man in a long cloak. Like the boatman, he had a beard - only he was taller, the beard was longer, and his voice was deeper and had more authority.

"Please help yourselves. I know you'll be hungry after your climb. There's bread and cheese, and fruit. And there's wine. But don't look for meat, there isn't any. We don't agree with killing animals."

As soon as he heard the words the Traveller became aware of how hungry he was, and he turned his attention to filling his plate and his wine glass. The food and the wine all seemed remarkably fresh; the other guests at the table must have felt the same way, for there was hardly any conversation taking place. When he paused to look up at the man with the beard the Traveller could no longer see him, and he couldn't work out whether this was because he was standing behind him or because he wasn't there any longer. The mists which he had encountered towards the end of his journey were still in evidence, and everything was becoming slightly hazy. The Traveller wondered whether the wine was stronger than he had realised; then he heard, or thought he heard, the man's voice saying "No, please. You've earned it. I'd like you to have some more."

A couple of minutes later the Traveller recognised that he had eaten and drunk as much as he wished to do. He looked around, seeing that others had reached the same stage. He was about to engage the man to his left in conversation when he became aware that the man with the beard was standing directly opposite him, and was saying:

"I see you've all had as much as you wish. The table will be cleared in a minute, and then there is one final request I must make. You are to place the stones you have carried with you in the middle of the table. I shall need them for the people who are coming here tomorrow."

The Traveller hardly saw the process of clearing the table, for he felt strangely reluctant to let go of his stone. But, seeing others doing so and feeling the force of the request, he took the stone from his pocket and placed it in the centre of the table. As soon as he had done so he began to feel increasingly drowsy, and unable to concentrate on what was happening around him.

He forced himself to look up. It seemed as though the other people around the table were dissolving even as he looked at them. He looked down and saw that the same thing was happening to him. Ah, he thought; this is pleasant. It's time to let go.

And a minute later, all that could be seen were twelve stones in the middle of the table."

"I really like that one, darling," Valerie said. "It's your best story yet."

"Good," Heather replied, sounding very matter-of-fact about it. "I've been thinking about it for weeks."

"There's only one thing I didn't quite understand. Why is it called a birthday stone?"

"Oh, it isn't really. It's actually a deathday stone. Only I don't think it would be kind to Grandpa if I called it that."

"No, darling, you're right," Valerie said, realising that she was about to cry, and burying her head in her daughter's hair as she hugged her.



