

THE FARMER AND THE SAINT

A Holiday Story for Friends and Family
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There once was a Farmer at the very center of the world. He loved the earth and he loved its bounty, though he sometimes worried that his love was imperfect, believing that if he could find ways to love even more fully, his love would be reflected in greater abundance.

In this same time, there was a Saint at the very top of the world. He loved its peoples and he loved their longings, though he sometimes worried that his love was imperfect, believing that if he could find ways to love even more fully, his love would be reflected in greater joy.

This is the story of how the wishes of the Farmer and the wishes of the Saint met, and mingled, each helping the other get a bit closer to their heart's desire.

There is no winter at the very center of the world-- only different kinds of summer. This is why our Farmer liked it, for summers are when things grow the fastest. It is when gold pours brightly upon the world for hours without end, when every green thing climbs the light like ivy, each leaf and vine stretching toward heaven as if racing to remake the Garden in the old story. At the center of the world there are quenching rains every afternoon, and they leave the air so rich with fragrance that every winged thing forgets to fly, resting on thistle and branch, blissful and dazed. The damp afternoon earth is always soft and yielding, a warm bed into which any seed sinks happily and from which all things rise, rich and ripe to bursting.

It is not difficult to farm such land; anyone lucky enough to find himself in such a place need do no more than rise each morning and harvest at his leisure....but our Farmer desired no leisure, nor was he content to lounge upon the happy circumstance of location. Instead, he worked tirelessly every day, and when he wasn't working, he was thinking of the work to come. At breakfast each morning, he would sit at his simple table, sipping his tea, gazing out his window at the land and considering how he might best serve it today. He was mindful of which crops followed which; when to follow carrots with corn, and when to let the soil sleep, recovering itself from its sun-splashed generosity.

He would go forth, tending every inch of earth and every leaf that grew from it; pruning here, tying there, gently turning the long rows by hand, releasing into the air the rich aroma of beginnings. That same scent worked itself under his nails and into every pore of his skin, so that wherever he went he carried the smell of growth and of possibilities. Any who witnessed his solitary work might wonder whether he was lonely, but they soon saw that he considered every growing thing to be his beloved family, his singular and happy devotion evident in every gesture. Who could be lonely surrounded by loved ones?

His love was most easily seen in his storytelling.

Our Farmer told stories all day long to everything that grew under his gaze. Why would he do such a thing? It passed the time, true enough, but hastening the day was not his purpose. His most fervent belief was that stories nourish all living things. Indeed, he believed that his greening family grew so quickly and well precisely because of the stories; he fancied that they strained so eagerly upward so as to better hear the tales. Cabbages and melons grew fat in their wish to be closer to the stories that drew them forth; peas and corn stretched hungrily upward, the way children lean forward when they need to know What Happened Next.

Our Farmer's only worry was that he knew too few tales. There was The Tale of the Flower and the Bee, and the story of the Acorn and the Oak, as well as the Sea Become Rain and The Day the Sun Caught the Moon, and perhaps a half-dozen others, but he fretted that these were too few by far. Of course, the tales were fresh and unknown to each season's new crop, and he never failed to tell any tale fully and well, whether for the fifth time or the five hundredth... but he feared that his store of stories was sick and pale compared to the bounty of the earth, and he sometimes felt shame at telling yet again a story he had already told a thousand times over.

Sadly, his talents lay in his hands and his attentions, and not in the invention of new ways to tell old things. No man ever lived who grew things as well as our Farmer, but he was no poet, nor minstrel, nor story-wright of any sort. He knew as certainly as he knew which hand to use when shaving that his crops came forth for love of his tales, and he feared that his inventory of tales might someday prove as thin and wanting as a plot of ground taxed too often with growing the same crops over and over again.

But what could be do, other than as he had always done, hopeful that it would somehow be enough?

There is no summer at the top of the world-- only different kinds of winter. This is why the Saint liked it. Winter is when things stay the same, and things had been the same at the top of the world ever since the Saint first arrived, so many years ago. The Saint's realm seemed always to have been there, teeming with tiny Makers using skills magical and mundane to craft countless wonders, which the Saint delivered to the world each year in a single December's night.

The Saint's Makers could craft virtually any object, of any material in any fashion. Wood and wicker, worked and woven ; metals, precious and common, teased into shapes both delicate and strong; sturdy stones like agate worked into perfect orbs, and gems from the world's secret furnaces set in brilliant and breathtaking arrangements.

From their myriad materials, the Makers created keepsakes that varied only a bit from winter to winter; we are, after all, simple creatures, easily impressed, and since their only mission is delight, they were seldom challenged in their work. Over the centuries, the Saint and his Makers had arrived at ways of working which were predictable and reliable.

There were, however, occasional exceptions, and it was in these instances that the Saint involved himself personally, overseeing the creation of what was called a Special Gift. When a Special Gift was needed, he often relied upon the steady (if sardonic) help of his oldest and most trusted Maker, whose name was Blaine. This particular December, our Saint had felt his attention drawn especially by the wishes of our Farmer. Although most people managed to merit some gesture of the Saint's generosity, there were those whom he especially admired and wished to reward with a Special Gift. Our Farmer was such a one.

"Stories, Blaine! He wants stories!" came the Saint's cheerful announcement.

"A Library Card then, sir?" asked Blaine, his voice all innocence on top with merry sarcasm underneath, the way a quiet pond might mask a swirl of sunfish below its placid face.

"Ho-ho-ho!" chuckled the Saint, peering keenly at Blaine, knowing that being ho-ho-ho'd at was a pet peeve of his. Blaine didn't mind the Saint's laughter (in fact he quite adored it) but he made a vigorous show of disliking the particular laugh we mortals have chosen to label as his trademark.

Blaine was, however, accustomed to the Saint's jabs, so he simply waited, summoning his very best expression of obedient boredom, almost yawning the question "Am I meant to guess?"

The Saint produced from one of his many pockets a tiny vial, marked with perfect, delicate script. Blaine made an elaborate show of turning his head sideways so that the Saint might rotate the vial, and Blaine read the single word, a name: "Dunyazade."

The Saint beamed, waiting.

Blaine smiled politely, waiting.

(This was a game they played often.)

At length the Saint ventured the question: "Do you recognize it?"

Blaine allowed his face to become worried, as if the Saint had asked him whether snow was white. "Recognize it?"

"Yes, yes, do you recognize it?"

Smiling inwardly at the Saint's mounting exasperation, Blaine spoke with elaborate patience, as though to a slow-witted oxen: "Do you mean the word, or do you mean the vial, or do you mean the vial's contents?"

“Yes!”

The point nearly won, Blaine allowed a trace of concern to enter his voice: “Yes to which, sir?”

“Yes! Yes to all of it! The name, the vial, the contents, do you recognize them!”

The storm on the Saint’s features was as false as Blaine’s pretended worries about the old fellow’s wits. The Saint allowed no one else to tease him, nor would Blaine have ever teased any other creature. Thus were they quite thoroughly suited to one another, and thus was Blaine free to whisper a scold: “Not so loud, Sir, you’ll upset the others.”

The Saint drew himself to his full height (which, being a Saint, was rather a flexible thing; he could make himself very tall when he wished, just as he could make himself very tiny.) “I cannot help but suspect that you are attempting to bait me because you are embarrassed by your own ignorance, but please know, Blaine, that there is no shame in your failure to recogni--”

Blaine’s features fell into a perfectly adolescent display of Oh Well if I Must, and he recited, “Dunyazade was, I believe, the fictional sister of the better known but equally fictional Scheherazade, whose skill with story-telling is the central element of her survival in the tales of the Arabian Nights.”

“Ah-hah!”

The Maker’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Ah-hah?”

“Fictional! Oh-ho! That’s where you’re wrong.” The Saint’s eyes twinkled with triumph.

Not even Blaine was entirely immune to surprise, and the Saint was one of the few beings in the known universe who could startle him. “Am I?”

The Saint chortled. “Scheherazade was real, her stories were real, and her sister was real. And the simplest way to trust that this is so is to ask ‘who wrote down all the stories she’s supposed to have told?’”

Blaine considered this. Then he pointed to the vial his master held. “And that substance is...?”

The Saint shook it gently. “These are fragments of the last bits of parchment on which Dunyazade inscribed her sister’s stories.”

Blaine’s eyes got a faraway look, as his making-brain began to play with this notion. “So... if properly fertile ground received such fragments.... and if ground thus sown were already enriched by a steady stream of tales....”

Their eyes met, and they both smiled. Blaine said crisply “I’ll have the instructions drawn up at once.” The Saint drew a breath in preparation for another of his famous laughs, but Blaine, already halfway down the hall, lifted one hand and said, without looking back, “Please don’t.”

So the Saint settled for a grin.

Christmas morning at the center of the world isn’t very different from other mornings-- warm, and humid, and lush with the scent of the thousands of things growing all around. Because our Farmer’s family was the greening world, he neither gave nor received gifts to mark the day. His existence felt gift enough.

So it was a surprise to him when he made his way into his kitchen and saw, there upon his simple table, a small box, beautifully wrapped what looked like red velvet and bound with a green ribbon which gleamed like new holly.

He glanced around, seeking signs of the mysterious giver. But there were no signs, save the gift itself.

He walked a slow circle around the table looking at the box, which seemed for all the world to be gazing just as interestedly back at him. After one full orbit, he stopped again. “Season’s Greetings,” he breathed, reaching carefully to grasp the ribbon’s end. He tugged, very gently, watching the shining green binding slide smoothly through itself before curling gently down onto the tabletop where it rested, its work done. He could see the faintest seam of a lid atop the box, which felt to have been fashioned from old, dense wood. Carefully, he grasped just above the seam, and the top of the box lifted easily from the rest of it. He set it atop the curled ribbon, craning his neck to see inside.

The first item in the box was a perfect square of rich vellum, inscribed by a meticulous hand. “Instructions,” it said at its heading, and then continued:

- “1. Locate the center of the desired area.
2. Prepare hole one hand deep and one hand across.
3. Pour in contents. Use entire vial.
4. Replace soil in hole.
5. Water lightly.
6. Allow twelve hours.”

Twelve hours for what?

He lifted the vellum and set it aside, peering at what lay beneath it; there, on a bed of white cotton, was a small glass vial. Gingerly, he grasped it between thumb and mid-finger, lifting it so that it might catch the light and let him see what it held inside.

Our Farmer knew earth when he saw it, and knew that within this small glass vessel was earth from far away... but there was something else mixed in, little flecks of something the color of aged ivory, marked in places by scratches of India-black. He turned it carefully this way and that; he began to have the strongest impression that its tiny cork was growing warmer in its eagerness to be freed.

He glanced again at the vellum square. "Locate the center of the desired area."

All right then.

There is generally no better aid to sleep than diligent work out of doors each day, but unexpected gifts with strange instructions and mysterious, unknowable consequences tend to trouble the peace and customs of simple folk. So it was that evening as our Farmer lay wide awake in a bed which suddenly seemed too small, too hard, too warm on this side but too chilly on that. His mind raced circles around his memory of the day, plucking at it with this question or that. He had never felt more wakeful in all his life. He would have risen and gone out into his fields with no other notion than to wait and to watch, but although it might sound odd, he couldn't escape the belief that to do so would have been... rude. The field must have its night, just as the Farmer, and neither should intrude upon the other while the sun hides its face. So it was that our Farmer had to settle for a swirling study of the day and all its moments.

He had prepared a spot in the very center of his fields and had followed the instructions to the letter. The vial safe in a pocket over his heart, he had knelt and with his two hands scooped a small hole, one hand deep and one hand wide. Then he had taken the vial from his pocket, again holding it up to the sun; it prised in flickers of gold and green and yellow and richest red, each color peopled with those strange flakes of ivory.

He carefully removed the tiny cork, which exited the vial with a very pleased-sounding but tiny pop. Perhaps it was an old memory of corks popping and the events which tended to follow, but our Farmer was startled to feel the impulse to open his mouth and to pour the contents of the vial into himself. (I have often wondered about the many ways this story would be different, had he done such a reckless thing.)

Happily, he knew the urge as foolishness, and without another thought he held the vial over the opening in the freshly-turned earth, watching its dark/light contents sift into the shadow. He returned the vial to his pocket and then, with both hands, slowly pushed the earth back into the hole, restoring what had been removed. Then he had poured a bit of water in a slow circle, painting a damp "O" upon the earth.

Then he had reluctantly risen, and tried to perform the other tasks that awaited him... but he was unable to stop his near-constant glances toward the dark, wet mound he'd made. As he moved among his greening kin, he tried to do as he had always done and tell a story, but it had not been a story he understood nor had ever heard before; very short,

with no real ending. “All of us were younger on the day that he received the strange box,” he began. “He did as the note instructed, and then began the waiting. He is waiting still.” It was an entirely unsatisfactory tale, but he told it over and over as he worked, and although frustrating, its truth was beyond reproach.

Even now, awake in his bed, the too-brief tale hummed at the edges of his understanding. “He is waiting still.” He turned his head to see the vial upon his night table, its gleam a smile in the moonlight. Perhaps it was answering: “Wait a bit more.”

At last, weariness lifted him, and bore him toward morning.

He awoke quickly, eagerly, and stood from his bed, stepping into the kitchen to boil water for his tea. He glanced out his window, the same window he gazed from each morning, and he stopped.

In his field, where he had poured the contents of the vial, there now stood a tree. It was not so huge a thing, yet it was surely taller than our farmer, and in its unlikelihood, it wasn't so different from any sequoia or ancient oak. Greatness is in the moment more than the size, after all.

Tea forgotten, he strode from his house, not at all dressed for a day's farming but desperate to peer more closely at this miracle. As he approached it, he marveled at how perfectly it was shaped, as if by constant attention from the most loving hands. As he grew nearer still, he was startled to see that its trunk was no simple cylinder of heartwood, but rather countless strands of living tree, some dark and some light, braided and rebraided until it was impossible to know how many there were. A hundred? More?

Finally, as he drew alongside this newest resident of his land, he took note of the leaves. No two were alike. Some were long and slender and smooth, while others were wide, their edges filigreed with the most astonishing intricacy. He felt certain that somehow, he was not looking at any one tree, but at all trees, for all time and every place there was. It was as if a forest, boundless and of endless variety, had funneled itself into a single thing of immense beauty and strange, quiet power.

Something about the leaves caught his attention, and he peered more closely.

If you've ever studied a leaf, perhaps holding it to the light, you've noted the wondrous, delicate network of lines, each a tiny avenue of its life, woven and layered and unknowably complex. You feel you might study it forever and still fall short of mapping it with accuracy. Each leaf is its own universe.

Standing under them and watching as the morning sun filtered through them, our Farmer saw that these leaves held the same intricacies, but his eyes widened and he gawped at one particular leaf, staring at a thing he'd never seen in all his farming life.

Within the leaf's tracery of veins, was writing. It said only "One day," but once seen, the words could not be denied. They were there. It was no coincidence, no trick of wishful thinking. They were there. Our Farmer squinched his eyes tight and then looked again, but nothing had changed. "One day."

"One day" what?

He looked at another leaf. He felt his racing heart lurch at this new surprise, for here, too, was writing, but this leaf said "Years passed."

He wanted to thrust both hands into the thick foliage, but forced himself to go slowly. This thick one said "Times were hard." This curly one, when uncurled, said "Everyone knows." This large one said "As though her life depended upon it." This tiny one said "Yearned."

There was "Still, he had hope" and "The skies grew dark" and "How could she have believed?" There was "With a mighty roar" and "The silence listened" and "The sound of the wind." There was "For her child" and "All by herself" and "Evil waited." There was "A smile that seemed to hurt" and "Hands to tame a honeywasp." Up as high as he could see, there was "Just as all seemed lost" and "Just when all were nearly saved."

Our Farmer stepped back, almost wrenching himself away from the tree. It was too much. It frightened and overwhelmed him. It filled him with questions that he could not answer; indeed, every leaf, every word, seemed its own riddle, and he was not a man comfortable with riddles. The earth, the green things that came from it, they were things a man could know. He could talk to them and share himself with them and feel they shared themselves in return. This thing, this riddle tree, felt as though the very earth had decided to mock him, and he recoiled from it in confusion.

He turned and walked into his cornrows, which rustled reassuringly. He tried to regain his runaway mind. Perhaps the tree was not mocking him. Perhaps it was.... He stopped in his tracks, the rustling suddenly inaudible. After all, he spoke to his crops,

Was it so very strange that one day, one of them would reply?

He returned to his kitchen, thinking as hard as he knew how to think, remembering the furrows those phrases had turned in his mind. "Everyone knows. The Sound of the wind. All by herself." He broke his fast with tea and graincake and then he returned to his fields. Where yesterday he could not stop himself glancing toward the center, today he could feel himself turning away, averting his eyes, unable to absorb more. Yet he murmured his morning to his many silent friends, and while it still had no proper ending, there was no question that he had a great deal more to tell them than he had the morning before.

Next morning, the tree was a hundred feet high, with branches forming a canopy wider than our Farmer's house. Its countless trunks were plaited together to a thickness wider than he could encircle with his arms, and where yesterday there had been hundreds and hundreds of leaves, they were now as countless as the stars. What's more, among the many leaves were... what? Flowers? They didn't quite *seem* flowers, but they occupied the same spaces as flowers might, ivory-colored and curled tightly upon themselves, as certain flowers do when awaiting the sun or the moon.

A gentle breeze rustled the many leaves, and one of the curled ivory flowers snapped free with a crisp sound, fluttering gently down toward the Farmer, who instinctively caught it with one hand, wincing as his brain caught up with his hand. Was it safe to touch? Were there thorns? Might it tear if he gripped it too tightly?

But it was powder dry and soft as skin in his hand, and when he sniffed cautiously, it didn't smell like any flower he knew; it smelled of cinnamon, and of sand; of bakery attics and prince's pillows. He could see clearly now that it was indeed curled in many layers upon itself, and as light glanced through one end, he fancied he saw more of the same delicate script he had seen in the leaves.

He stared at it, knowing now what it was, unable to make sense of it yet certain to his bones that he was correct: It was a scroll.

He took a deep breath, and carefully unrolled it, his eyes hungry for whatever might be within. It revealed itself further with each rotation, and he began to read even before the unwinding was complete:

“All of us were younger then, but most of us still remember the winter of a thousand snows. Across the kingdom, it was as if a new sea of drifting ice had buried every home and hovel, and even the palace of the King lay half buried in heedless drifts which had equal disdain for all humans. The King of Men had shown disrespect to the Queen of Winter, and she was bound to teach him the cruelest of lessons.”

He let his eye skip ahead, and saw that there were easily many hundreds more lines than he had read. Skipping to the end, he hesitated over the final sentence: “Remember: Kings and Queens are proud, and they often forget what's best unless their subjects remind them.” Oh, my.... what an intriguing story this must surely be!

Our Farmer held the scroll-flower tight to his breast, and then remembered, and looked up, where countless others grew, and trembled, waiting to fall.... and was it his imagination, or did the earth beneath him seem to almost strain upward, pushing him with it, filled with craving for this particular harvest?

At once he gave a great shout of joy, for what had frightened him yesterday now struck him as inestimable riches. He turned a slow circle, his smiling face as bright as the sun. “Oh, my loves!” he called in a voice that went all the way to the sea on one side and the

mountains on the other. “We shall have a new story every day for as long as we live!” and another breeze came, and more scroll flowers fell all around him, and our Farmer laughed until he cried.

At the top of the world, Blaine and the Saint sat quietly before a warm fire. The Saint, who sees everything he cares to see, said “Our Farmer is quite beside himself about his gift.”

“Is it for him or for the earth around him?” asked Blaine.

“Ah, friend,” chuckled the Saint. “That is the very heart of our efforts, isn’t it? He sees no difference. And so, neither shall we.”

Blaine pondered this, and nodded. “Just so, sir. Oh, I meant to tell you earlier....” He reached into one of his pockets. “One of our ’prentices found this outside. The wind that reaches us is the same wind the blows at the center of the world, apparently,” and he held out a soft, ivory-colored scroll.

The Saint accepted it, and unrolled it, squinting as he read “There once was a Farmer at the very center of the world. He loved the earth and he loved its bounty...” and then he began to chuckle. “Quite right,” he nodded. “Merry Christmas, hm?”

Blaine nodded, and may have smiled. “Merry Christmas indeed, sir.”