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The Old Man Who Walked with a Broken Crutch

IT WAS WHERE THE OLD WEST'S DARK FOREST RUNS OUT OF BREATH and the river, pretending to be a thief, steals much of daylight's silver. Here one morning, a man with a broken crutch came out of the forest and went along the river gathering its coin. He wore a cap for the weather and a jacket Time had touched roughly. And he limped.

The limp was serious, twisting the man's frame. His left foot had a dragging stutter to it, the boot greatly worn. The man looked as if he would topple easily. And need or want moved in the air about him.

The single crutch at his left side was crude and bound in places, where it had been broken, with tightly coiled wire. Avershaw the blacksmith, from his porch, saw him first, noticed how he leaned to one side. "Melba," he called, and his wife came onto the porch. "We will have another for breakfast," he said. Her apron was gathered in her hands and she looked at the stranger and said, "I am sure we will."

Avershaw, a big man with red suspenders and heavy corduroy pants, stood and hailed the other man. "Could you stand for coffee and a biscuit, sir? We do not have much but we can ease some of your hunger. Eggs would be another matter." Again, Avershaw noted how the man leaned almost to the point of falling. Then he saw the man's kindly face, the clear blue eyes, and the way he held his chin. And his hands! His hands were delicate and smooth and did not look as if they belonged with the crutch or had used the crutch for a long time.

"You are too kind, sir," the man with the crutch said. A slight smile wore on his face. "We're in luck, for I have two eggs here I found last evening in the forest, and no place to cook them." From a pocket of the worn jacket he brought out two eggs. "If the lady of the house would oblige, she may do as she wishes with them." He held out the two eggs and Avershaw called his wife. "Melba, we'll have biscuits dipped in eggs today, just the way you like them."

Then Avershaw pointed to a chair and said, "Rest easy while the biscuits get dipped and fried. We'll have our coffee here where the sun comes first. If I were a carpenter, I'd fix that crutch for you, but my iron would be too heavy for you." Then Avershaw said, "By what name are you called, sir?"

They call me Stick. They've called me Stick for a long time, for so long I know no other name. So, Stick I will be. It's not uncomfortable for me."

They ate their biscuits with a small mound of butter and sweet syrup. And a second cup of coffee.

"Do you have far to go?" Avershaw said, as he finished his coffee. "We could put some lunch in a bag for you."

"Not far," Stick said, "not far at all."

When the coffee was gone Stick said thank you and went on his way.

Just before noon, still where the forest runs out of breath and the river

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steals daylight, Stick was hailed by another man in his yard. He had seen the man's serious limp in the heat of the sun. "Stranger, would a bit of shade and a small bite of food aid you on your journey? We do not have much, but we will share. I am here with two daughters. Today is a day without meat for us. We have a few pennies left from bread we bought."

"Such a lucky day it is," Stick said. "Last night in the forest I came upon a deer who had impaled himself. I came away with some venison." From deep in his jacket pocket he drew out a small parcel wrapped in dark paper. "However, your daughters choose to cook it, let it be done." The daughters danced away with the venison. Soon, aromas climbed the air in the middle of the day. And there was a sauce to go with the bread and the four of them dipped their bread and ate the venison.

"My name is Rastoff and I'm a music teacher," Rastoff said, his big teeth showing as he talked. "If I could work with wood, I'd make you a new crutch to assist you in your journey. But I have no knowledge of wood. Nor what its grain is or where its strength lies, except here." And with that, he drew a violin up from below the table and played songs for Stick and his daughters. After a while, Stick said, "I must be going. But I do not have far to travel." He left with his *thank you* as soft as music on the air.

Stick was not far away by the close of evening. A young boy came up to him and said, "My name is Arnold, and my mother saw you coming for a long time from her window. We do not have much, but you are welcome to eat at our table. We have soup. It is thin soup, but it will be warm."

"Young man," Stick said, "tell your mother we are in luck. Just last evening, in the middle of the Dark Forest, where there was a small patch of late sunlight, I found potatoes, beets and carrots." He dug deep into his jacket pocket and brought out the vegetables. "Tell your good mother to thicken the soup with these."

The boy nodded with delight and ran off to give the vegetables to his mother. He soon came back and said, "She thanks you a great deal. If my father were here, he could fix your crutch for you, but he is away in the Great War that moves around the world. We hope he comes back soon. He is a carpenter and could fix your crutch easily."

At dusk they ate the newly thickened soup with the potatoes and the beets and the carrots cut up in it. The soup was delicious and the boy soon fell asleep on the porch of his house while the mother cleaned the dishes. Stick said goodbye. "I have to keep moving. You have a fine boy. I hope your husband gets back soon. War is a great separator, but often not the final one."

His way took him along a stone wall for a few miles, the sun sinking all the while.

The river had nearly given up all of its daylight when Stick was walking past an old farmhouse sitting back from the road like a deep shadow. Not one window had a light in it, nor was there any smoke coming from the chimney. A voice hailed him from the darkness in front of the house. "If you have no place to sleep, sir, we could put you up, but you must be able to do with the darkness and the cold. We do not have any light or any

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kindling to start a fire or any matches for that matter. I am afraid that my children will not be able to do their reading this night and they might also catch cold. The edge of the moon says it is going to be cold."

"You are most kind, sir," Stick said, "but fear not. Last evening in the forest I found some flint and stone in an old pouch on a tree stump. We can start a fire with them."

"All well and good," the man in the darkness said, "but we still have no kindling to get the big logs burning."

"Ah, but we do," Stick said, as he slammed his broken crutch over a large stone in the wall and splintered it for kindling. The sound crackled so harshly in the night it frightened the man.

"But how will you walk on the morrow?" the man said.

Stick had no hesitation. "You will make me a crutch tonight," he replied.

"I have been unable to work for a long time," the man said. But all night he worked hard on several pieces of wood he found behind his house, knowing that before this stranger came, he would not have even looked for such wood. Light came from a good fire and warmth filled the house and the children were asleep after reading their lessons. In the morning the man handed Stick a shiny new crutch that caught the early morning sun all along its shaft. The crutch was smooth with a lacquer finish on it and a pad on the top where it fit under Stick's arm.

That sun was barely up over the horizon when Stick walked away in the early rays of sunlight. Down past the fields he went, past the stone walls, to where the river again was catching up all the daylight it could grasp. Once, with his new crutch, he waved back at the man.

Later that evening all the people gathered in town and were talking about the man with the broken crutch.

"I am glad that we were able to feed him," Avershaw said, his thumbs hooked on his red suspenders. "We gave him breakfast, a royal breakfast, a meal to begin the day with." He paused, hooking his suspenders a little higher. "As my mother used to say, 'A meal to touch the backbone.'"

"And we gave the poor man his lunch," Rastoff said, "with venison and thick gravy. A meal also fit for a king." He smiled proudly, his large teeth showing. "We even played music for him to soothe his vagrant soul. If there were a place for that poor man to live, this would be it. We all did so much for him. All taking our turn with a stranger." Those around him nodded in agreement.

The boy's mother, not to be outdone, not wanting to be left out of a share of goodness, took her turn. "A most splendid and thick soup we gave the man. Thick as any soup can be, with potatoes and beets and new carrots to give solid offerings. A treat for any beggar on his rounds. The kind that sticks to one's ribs." It was a kind of punctuation when she added, "And he ate a goodly share of it."

The others nodded in agreement again, seemingly all of one mind.

They were very satisfied with themselves, puffed and self-indulgent,

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but a voice from the edge of light, the man from the darkness, said, "Do any of you know what he gave to us? Why do we continually wrap ourselves up in our own gifts? Why do we tie up our own ribbons in such a manner?"

"Well," the boy's mother said, "what did you do for him? It was near dark when he left my house."

"What fools we are," the man answered. "It's not what we did for him. It's what he did for us. He took care of us. Me, a useless man for years, I made a crutch for him. I haven't worked like that in a long time and I guess we all know that." For a moment he hung his head. "That's one of the reasons he came here. The man needed a crutch to get on with. And he saw to it that I made it for him. We did not really do for him. He did for us, but we are afraid to say it."

The next morning, on the other side of the river, where the mountain suddenly stands tall and the field stops its long run, the man with a broken crutch came limping out of the forest ready to lean on some more people.

An elderly man, enjoying early sunlight, hailed him from his porch. The man was clearly into his own troubles, but said, "Another stranger, on this same route you're apparently on, said you would be along soon and might have some cheer for me, but I might surprise you and lend you some of my cheer," He laughed a bit at his own words, and added, "Not that I have much to give, but something you might think about."

He offered a seat on his porch and poured a cool drink of water to the new stranger. "Let me tell you a thing or two. I am a lonely old man looking for one honest man to share my goodness with and I suspect you are the man or the kind of man that I've been seeking for in these late days of ours, yours and mine."

"Well, sir, said the man who came walking with a crutch, "I hope I am what you are looking for, a man to share your goodness." He sat back in the most comfortable seat he had ever sat in, reveling in its softness and comfort, and new sensations in the air about him."

"Sir," said the new host, "I have in my possession a veritable ton of money and jewels and no way to share it in goodly comfort, like knowing it could be and should be used wisely to benefit the good people of this world."

"Oh, my, my man, my travels have brought me in contact with so many good people, people who share what little they have had with a poor man walking with a crutch. Oh, so many of them with the best of hearts, the kind of people you would admire to your last breath, or to mine, as I would have it happen, taking care of those who have taken care of others, including me. Is there a pact I must sign to cover my part in these revelations? Or does it move on faith, which surely must be so? I can see no other way."

"Come inside with me, sir, and see what benefits abound for the kind, the good, and the needy."

He paused before one drab door in the small house, dishevelment

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marking every surface including that drab door of surprises galore. The glut of money and jewels behind that drab door shone like the sun itself, as bright, as breath-taking as any dawn on the curve of the world itself.

“I know my way back there like I know the back of these hands that have gripped my crutch for all these miles. They will be pleased to see me come back along the lonely trail.

The pact was written and signed and the wealthy man, living in the poorest-looking house, handing over the key to the room to his new friend, fell down dead, knowing his errands would be taken care of.

His first visit back along the way was to a boy he had met once, and he simply said to him, “Call your mother to come join us, Arnold. Times’s been waiting a long while.”