

THESE
NAMELESS
THINGS

SHAWN
SMUCKER



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© 2020 by Shawn Smucker

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To Priscilla

“The undiscovered country, from whose
bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will.”
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

“Why do we let our guilt consume us so?”
Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

“Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a guide from
beyond.”
Rumi

PROLOGUE

A Confession

WE MOVE IN a loose group, winding through the trees. We are more people than you can even imagine, yet there is hardly a word spoken. We smell like exhaustion, like miles piled on top of miles, like time when it has already run out. Yet somehow we also sound like hope, like fresh water washing through the reeds. We discreetly share food with each other, nearly all of us strangers, nodding politely, and in spite of our condition, we cannot keep the inexplicable hope from showing in our eyes.

This is our first day out from under the shadow of the mountain. Which sounds exactly like something he would have said in that deep, rich voice of his, if he was here with us. And he would have smiled—how happy he would have been, saying those words!

Then he would have laughed, and the thought of him laughing is too much for me right now. It brings up an ache that makes it hard to breathe. I shake my head and try to

laugh it off, but my grin falters, and any kind of sound I might make lodges somewhere in my throat.

It's my fault he's not with us. There's no way around it.

How could I let him go back on his own?

It's more an accusation than a question, and now the aching wells up behind my eyes. I squeeze them shut. I stop walking and think about turning around. It's the guilt that threatens to consume me.

The path goes up and up and up, and everyone is so tired, but the old fears are fresh enough to keep us walking, to keep us moving through this heavy weariness. I reluctantly rejoin the movement up the mountain. Nearly everyone stares at the ground in front of their feet. Maybe that's all that matters right now. One step after the other. Moving farther up. Moving farther in, away from her. Hoping she won't find us, won't convince us to go back.

Up ahead and to the left, I notice that the trees clear along the edge of the cliff, and I find myself walking faster, faster, stumbling over my own feet, pushing between this person and that person, mumbling my apologies, my voice strange in the voiceless woods. I get to the clearing and it is what I hoped it would be: an overlook. A cold wind blows up from the valley, rushes through that open space, agitating the leaves behind me into the wild rustling sound of secrets. I climb a kind of stone platform, and the rock is gritty under my fingers. There's no snow up here, but the rock is cold. Everything feels present and real.

Have you ever, for a flash of time, understood the significance of being? The miracle of existing? That's what I feel now, climbing up onto the ledge: the particular rough-

ness of the rocks under my knees, the chill of the wind on my face. The unique expression of my existence, here, as I stand.

I look out over that huge expanse of miles that all of us walked through, and I scan the valley. I hold one hand up, shield my eyes from the glare of those bright clouds, and hope to see nothing out there except empty plains.

At first I'm relieved and my shoulders relax because all I see is the undulating ground stretching to the west, as far as the horizon. The wind continues to whip up around me, and I draw my arms closer to my chest, duck my chin down, and try to find warmth in my body. It is there somewhere inside of me, that warmth, that fire. I can sense the rustling of all the people hiking, moving up the mountain behind me. I can feel them glancing at my back as they pass, taking in my silhouette on the overlook, probably wondering why I would stop, why I would look back. This makes me angry. I want to turn and answer them, answer all of their unasked questions.

I knew him.

I loved him.

Do you have any idea what our freedom cost?

But I keep looking out over the plains, and finally I see something like two ants wandering along a dusty pile. I sigh. All the way down there in the valley, where we began the climb up this mountain, through the trees, those two small specks walk away, walk west. Their progress is barely visible, but there is nothing to stop them, not as far as the eye can see. We will soon be separated by this great chasm. Everything has fallen into a stark, dazzling white, the light glaring

off endless miles of glittering frost. I can smell snow, but none is falling.

He is going with her.

I hoped that he might be among the last of the crowd, that he could possibly be tagging along at the back, that he would come up and surprise me. We would hug and I would laugh out loud—my first real laugh in a long time—and he would explain how he got out of going back and that all the wrong I had done was magically undone.

But he couldn't do it. He couldn't reverse my mistakes, couldn't easily untie my deceptions, and the only option was for someone to go back. He is doing it. I strain my eyes toward the horizon, but even from that height, I can't see the mountain we came from, the one whose shadow we have finally escaped. I don't think I'd want to see it, but I search that far-off horizon anyway.

"Do you see him?" she asks, walking up behind me. Not long ago, she would have wrapped her arms around my body, moved in close and held me. I would have felt her warmth against my back. But not now. Not after everything that has happened.

I close my eyes, imagining. I shiver and nod. "I can't believe he has to go back." Unspoken are the words, *It's my fault*.

We stand there in those words, the wind whipping them around us, catching on them, sailing away with them. She doesn't offer any kind of consolation.

"It was here all along," she says, a lining of amazement in her voice. "This mountain was here, waiting for us."

"Are you . . ." I begin, then start over. My voice is hoarse, and I clear it against the dry, cold air. "Do you . . . remember?"

“Everything. It’s all coming back to me.”

“Even before?”

“Even before.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

How is it that a mind can contain so many memories? Where does it all fit? Into what nooks and crannies do we place these recollections of love and sadness, horror and joy? Into what tiny space of our minds do we put a person we met long ago, or a disappointment, or a lie? And where do memories go when we forget, and how is it that they can come rushing back, unbidden?

I am embarrassed by what I did, the choices I made. There are things I would rather forget, but because I can think of nothing else to say, a confession emerges: “I’m such a liar. You know that by now, right? How many things I said that weren’t true?”

She is still as a fence post. It almost seems like she’s holding her breath.

“You know, I would lie for the fun of it,” I whisper, “even when there was nothing in it. Just because. I don’t even know why. What’s wrong with a person who lies for no reason?”

I don’t realize she is crying until I hear her try to stifle a sob, like a hiccup. She moves closer but we’re still not touching, and we remain there for a time, watching the two people down on the plain. We cry together. She sighs a trembling sigh, and when she speaks I can tell she is trying to lift our spirits.

“The rumor coming back from the front is that the higher you go, the warmer it gets.”

“Then we should keep walking,” I say, but I don’t move. A great silence falls on us as the last people pass by behind us. He is not among them. I knew he wouldn’t be, was positive of this after seeing the two far-off figures walking away, but I had still allowed myself to hope.

“There they go.” She steps away, as if she can’t stay too close or she’ll give in to old impulses like hugging me or pulling me close. “He saved all of us,” she says, and I can hear the tears in her voice. “And now he’s going back.”

I nod again, the tears flowing. I wipe them away hastily with the back of my hand. They’re embarrassing, those tears. They make me feel small.

“Dan,” she says. “It’s time. He’ll find her, and he’ll follow us over.”

I look over at her for the first time since she came up behind me. “Will he? Will he find her? Will he find us?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Will he find me?” I ask, my voice tiny and quivering.

Wordlessly, we climb down the rock and turn toward the top of this new mountain, this fresh start, this beginning. We can see the tail end of the procession of people moving up the trail. We will soon be back among them, or maybe we’ll stay back a bit, find our own pace.

“I wonder,” I say quietly.

“Wonder?” she asks, falling into step beside me. I want to take her hand again, but those days are long gone. “Wonder what?”

My response is a whisper. I can’t imagine she even hears me. “Can he really cross from there to us? Or is he lost? Forever?”

The breeze snatches my words and throws them out into the void, but she hears them. And she smiles. “He’ll find us.”

So childlike. So trusting. I want to question her. I want to raise my flag of doubt, but before I can, she says it again.

“He’ll find us.”

PART ONE

1 THE LIE

MONTHS BEFORE I stood on that overlook and searched for any sight of him, on the opposite side of the endless plains and under the shadow of the western mountain, the three of us laughed together—Miho and Abe and me. Miho was nearly crying, she was laughing so hard, shaking her head and trying to stop but then starting right up again, her body bobbing up and down. She waved a weak hand at us: *Stop it!* Abe and I grinned at each other, huge, sappy grins. We didn't know what to do in the face of such laughter. When she did that, when she leaned back and laughed like that, I could sit and watch her for days. I felt lighter in that moment than I had in a long time, released, like a balloon untied and rising.

Miho caught her breath and sighed, and I was filled with something close to pure joy. What were we laughing about? I don't know. I can't remember, because there was a pause, and Abe said those three words, and everything we were laughing about melted away. They stared at me to see how I would handle the news, Abe with his steady gaze trained on my face, and Miho, her eyes dancing nervously from me to the sky to the plains and back to me again. I realized that's why they had come up to my house: to share this news, to see how I would take it, and to talk me off the ledge if needed.

Mary is leaving.

We ended up sitting against the back wall of my house. I went from joyful to exhausted. We looked out over the plains, absorbing the gentle breeze, not saying a word. There was the smell of fresh green grass and wet earth coming toward us from off in the distance, and rain on the way. The breeze was cool and weightless, but I felt the heaviness of nameless things.

The horizon seemed impossibly far off, the clouds low, and I experienced a kind of dizziness, a spinning, an inability to determine what was up and what was down, and then a low-grade panic. Air was suddenly in short supply, and I wondered if this was what it was like to hyperventilate. I rested my head against the wall and stared into the slits of blue sky peeking through. But that didn't help, so I closed my eyes completely.

"Are you sure, Abe?" I asked, and even though my question was aimed at him, I hoped Miho would chime in and tell me it wasn't true, it was all just a joke. I watched a small speck drift across the red horizon inside my eyelids.

Please, Miho, I thought. Tell me it's not true.

"She'd like to leave tonight," Abe admitted. The deep, quiet sound of his voice stayed with me even when he stopped talking. His voice was like the earth, solid beneath the long, soft grass. If Mary left, would everyone else leave too? Even Miho? Even Abe? The thought of living there in town alone made me sick. I couldn't keep waiting, not by myself.

"We haven't lost anyone for years," I said. "Why is she leaving now?"

"We're not losing her, Dan," Miho said, the tiniest exas-

peration in her voice. “Everyone will leave sooner or later. You know that. There’s nothing lost. Everyone will leave, eventually.”

She paused, and I could tell she was trying to decide if she should keep talking.

“Even you,” she added.

I opened my eyes and looked at her, took in her short, black-rooted, dyed-blond hair rustling in the wind. Her eyes softened when our gazes met, and she surrendered a small smile that showed only at the corners of her mouth and the slopes of her temples. It was an expression as far removed from the minutes-ago mirth as I could imagine, but it was full of compassion. She had a triangle tattoo below the corner of one eye, like a tear. Another, much larger swirling tattoo filled with lines and shapes and blocks made its way up her neck, touched her jaw below her ear, extended up along her temple, and edged her hairline like a kind of border.

I remembered when she had received those tattoos, and why—she had been so sad, trying to cover up the marks of what had happened to her in the mountain. We had all tried to cover up our scars, most of us through distraction or busyness or work or fun. Some of us used tattoos. Some of us, eventually, tried to escape the horror by simply leaving, walking east. I had held her hand while Lou filled in the dark lines. How tightly she had squeezed my fingers, until the tattoo was hurting both of us. Lou had left town soon after that, headed east over the plains. No more tattoos, not after he was gone.

That was long ago.

“It’s only Mary St. Clair,” she said quietly. “It’s only Mary.”
As if to say, *It’s not me. I’m not leaving you.*

Abe gave her a sideways glance, a kind of reproach, but he didn’t say a word.

*Maybe today it’s “only” Mary, but who will it be tomorrow?
There are only nine of us left in town. Eight after Mary goes.
What will I do when everyone is gone?*

But I didn’t have to say anything. They knew what I was thinking. They knew my concerns.

“Maybe we should leave with her?” Miho suggested, her voice timid as the breeze, her long, slender fingers finding mine in the depths of the cool grass. “Maybe now is the time?”

“You can go anytime you want,” I said, and the words escaped without emotion. She didn’t remove her hand from mine, but I felt her stiffen. Why was I always pushing her away?

“Dan,” Abe said, and he could have gone a thousand different ways.

That wasn’t a nice thing to say.

You will have to go sometime too.

Your brother is never coming over that mountain.

But he said none of those things. He was the kindest man I knew, the kindest I had ever known.

“Dan,” he started again, “I am not leaving without you. Do you hear me? Miho is not leaving without you. You know that. We’ll wait. We’re in no hurry. Mary’s leaving doesn’t change any of that.”

I did know it, but in the way you can know something with your head and not your heart, the way you can know a calculation is correct but still feel you’ve not done the work

quite right. I was always second-guessing myself, always wondering why.

The breeze shifted direction, now blowing out into the plains, away from us, and it was suddenly cooler. There was an ominous feeling in the dropping temperature, the shifting of the wind. I might have suspected there was more change on the way than simply Mary's leaving.

I should have seen it coming.

The wind was trying to tell me.

The air charged around the house in gusting swirls. The long grass panicked, spinning, and out on the plains it billowed and rolled like waves in the sea, flashing white when it bent over and dark green when it stood up again. The movement was hypnotic.

I wanted to say something to ease the tension, something like, "I'm sorry" or "I know" or "Of course, you're right." I didn't want to spoil Mary's upcoming departure, and I didn't want her leaving to change anything about us or the village. It had been a long time since anyone left—I had begun to believe no one else would go, that the nine of us would spend eternity here, together.

I gently pulled my hand out from under Miho's and stood up. I stared out at the plains again, and the breeze burst around the house, this time colder and carrying drizzle. I pushed my hand back through my wet hair and it stood on end. I imagined I was a wild man setting out. The wind ripped at my shirt.

"What if he never comes over the mountain, Abe?" My voice felt empty, and the two of them felt far away. "What if I wait and wait, and he never comes?"

It was a hard question, one I ignored most days. But not on that day, and the question tied the knot inside of me tighter and tighter until my breath was hard to find.

“Did I ever tell you the one memory I still have of him, from when we were boys?” I asked. I had, many times. But they didn’t stop me. “Adam and I were standing beside the creek bank, looking out over the water. The creek was swollen and fast after days of spring rain. He started climbing one of the trees—you know, the kind with branches that hung out over the water? And I pleaded with him to come down. But he didn’t listen. I don’t think he ever listened to me.”

I stopped, and I sensed it approaching again, the anxiety.

“He kept climbing out over the water, grinning back at me the whole time, laughing at my concern. I have a feeling he did that often. And then the branch he was on broke, and he disappeared down into the water, branch and all, and was swept away.” My voice trailed off. “I ran along the creek, screaming, ‘Adam! Adam!’ I tripped over rocks, branches scratching my face. He popped up to the surface, still holding on to the broken branch. When I saw him, I shouted his name even louder, and when he heard me, he looked over at me. And he grinned. He was being swept away, and he was still grinning.”

I shook my head in amazement. “I remember pulling him to shore, pulling the branch and him and everything else. I never knew I could be that strong. I pulled him up out of the water and we sat there together, soaking wet. He was breathing hard, and I was crying and angry and relieved. I didn’t know what to say to him. He scared me so bad. I think

he did that a lot too. I don't know. It's hard to tell, but that's how it feels."

But it was all a lie.

I didn't have any memories of my brother apart from knowing he existed. None of us in town remembered anything of consequence about our lives before the horror of the mountain. I mean, we each had a few minor facts to lean on, maybe the existence of a family member or two, the image of a place, but the stories of our lives had been erased from our minds by what had happened to us in that forsaken range.

Abe had tears in his eyes. "The three of us, we've been here for a long time." His old voice wavered. Miho made a sound of assent, a quiet sound, and Abe continued. "I was here long before either of you escaped to this place. I've seen a lot of people come over that mountain, and I've seen a lot of people leave us, head east over the plains. This village will be here as long as you need it to be." He grunted, as if completely convinced by what he had just said.

"What if no one's left in the mountain?" I asked, agitated and shaken. "What if Adam already came over and I missed him? Or what if he's still in there but he can't leave on his own? What if they won't let him leave?"

They. I shuddered at the thought of the ones who had kept us there, flinched involuntarily as if I could feel it all again.

Miho reached up and moved her finger in a line along the tattoo on her forehead. "We're not leaving without you," she insisted. "Not even if it's only the three of us left here. Abe and I, we'll wait with you."

I turned a short circle, not knowing where to walk. We

were all getting good and wet now in the rain. I felt like I was losing my mind. Maybe sleep would help.

“Are you sure Mary’s going to go through with it?” I asked. “It’s a long walk. Maybe she’ll change her mind.”

Abe nodded. “She’s leaving tonight.”

“In the rain?” I asked.

“I expect if the storm comes, she’ll wait until tomorrow. Don’t blame her, Dan. It’s her time. When it’s time, it’s time.”

I bit my lip, nodded. A round of thunder rolled down toward us from the mountain. “And if it’s still raining tomorrow evening?” I asked, feeling petulant and angry. I wanted to argue with someone. I wanted to irritate everyone close to me. I knew it wasn’t Abe’s fault, but I had to take my disappointment out on someone.

“She’s leaving,” Miho said in a soothing tone. “I talked to her too, after Abe told me. I went to her house, Dan. Trust me. She’s leaving. All her stuff is bundled up and ready. Tonight, or tomorrow night, or the next. As soon as the weather’s good, she’s walking.”

I nodded curtly. I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “Feels like the rain’s going to get heavy,” I said, and they glanced at each other, took the hint.

Abe stood slowly, the way an older man stands when he has been sitting on the ground for too long—a stiff unfolding, a pause when it appeared for a moment that he might sit back down. But he pushed through, stood up, and Miho rose beside him with ease.

“Shall we take our leave, my lord?” she asked Abe in a formal voice with an unrecognizable accent, as if she was a royal lady from some bygone era. She waved her arms in

a flourish and bowed in his direction, extending one of her pale hands to him.

I loved her for this, her ability to lighten the mood. I smiled, and she caught my gaze out of the corner of her eye and winked at me.

Abe grinned, sheepish. His black skin had a matte finish to it, a flat sort of richness, and his smile pulled all of that back, stretched it so that he was young again. His face became bright white teeth and flashing eyes, and I could see for a moment what he had probably been like as a boy: mischievous, foolhardy. But not as lovely as he was in that moment. That would not have been possible. What had I ever done to deserve his lavish friendship?

“Yes, ma’am,” he said in his low voice.

On the other side of the house, the side that faced the mountain, thunder trembled again, louder, with sharp edges and a crackling that lingered and spread its fingers through the air. Abe took Miho’s arm and I felt a small pang of jealousy, even though it was Abe and it was Miho and I had nothing to be jealous about. I followed them around the corner of the house to the front, and the breeze was a chilled wind that raced down the mountainside.

The mountain. There it was, rising only a few hundred yards from the front of my house, tall and terrible and crowned with a realm of dark gray clouds that boiled nearly green around the edges. There was snow up at the peaks—I knew this not because I could see it, but because I knew those mountains the same way I knew my own face in a mirror. It was a constant in my dreams, my nightmares. The shadow of it haunted each of our faces, in the shallow space under

our eyes or the dark of our mouths when they hung open while we slept. I felt, not for the first time, that the mountain might collapse on all of us.

I wondered how many remained in that pit in the mountain, how many at that moment were tortured or chased, how many were fleeing. How many were hungry and hiding and moving through the shadows, trying to find their way out, trying to find their way to us.

I glanced over toward the sliver of the canyon that split the face of one of the cliffs, two hundred yards up the hill from my house, the only break in that long line of sheer rock and crumbling rubble. The only way through. I lost myself staring up at the mountain, thinking about that thin canyon, the only way.

When I finally turned to say goodbye to Miho and Abe, they were halfway down the hill, clinging to each other. There was a long gap between my house and the group of houses that made up the rest of the town. The narrow, grassy road we called the greenway traveled from the mouth of the canyon, passed by where I stood, and meandered down to the forty or fifty houses scattered like seeds, mostly empty. Once upon a time, that green path comforted regular arrivals from the other side of the mountain, used so often by those escaping that the grass had been flattened and there had been bare patches, streaking paths of brown. But now the greenway had grown thick and lush, used only by the few of us who still lived here.

“Goodbye!” I shouted, regretting how I had turned the visit sour. They had only wanted to let me know what was

happening, and I had made them feel bad. I lived in perpetual guilt about one thing or another.

They disregarded the rain—it was warm and easy to idle through. Miho waved without looking, her hair wet and flat against her head. But Abe turned halfway around, lifted his free arm, and smiled at me. It was a mischievous grin, and I could tell he liked being escorted down the greenway by a beautiful woman.

His face grew serious. His voice barely reached me before being blown back away from the mountain and swept out over the plains.

“Better get inside!” he shouted. “There’s a storm comin’!”