To Drink From A Mountain Stream
by Jane Pape

A tiny shadowed figure ran quickly and quietly down the muddy back alley, across the overgrown lot where the ancient mall used to be and crept silently over the rusted catwalk above the heads of the uniformed soldiers who sat perched above the mounted guns. It traveled carefully the twelve desolate blocks to the outskirts of the city, just to hear the tale of the old book merchant who lived in a singed and crumbling section of what used to be a university. The elderly man had little left to do but think back, ever since it became illegal for anyone other than the government to care for the books he used to watch over. Now he must spend his time retelling the stories he memorized before the books were censored or destroyed.

Tonight a handful of dark and weary figures gathered for the recital. Over the past few moonless nights the storyteller had gathered to mind the most inspirational of his tales, for those who dared to be out after curfew and had long since perfected the path over the minefields and past the sentries. It is worth the terrible risk to sit on the dingy jute mats scattered on the damp floor at the feet of the old man and hear his unbelievable stories.

The storyteller loses himself in the intense eyes of the small circle around him and begins to weave his tale. "Many centuries ago we were not as we are now. Our ancestors sailed across a large body of crystal blue water seasoned with the salt of the earth. They chose to settle in an unmapped part of the world—it was looked upon as the answer to their prayers." A low murmur from the group brought the man back to the present and he realized the problem. "I guess I should define a prayer for you," he said intently. "It is a wish made to a God who sat in our forefathers' Heaven, and who they felt would lead them always on the right path if they followed his teachings. It was for this God that these people ventured as far and settled in a place unfamiliar and often unfriendly. Many of them risked their lives to build this piece of the world into a place to live and pray freely. Eventually, after centuries of growth, they had discovered a good way of life. There were laws that were made to ensure that all people in this place were treated equally and the words of their God provided direction."

These people felt so strongly about this way of life that they tried desperately to spread it and often were called upon to defend others for their rights to live without fear. While their new country was growing stronger so were the forces of countries who were a constant threat to this freedom. Our great-grandparents had fought very hard to make their dreams into reality and now it seemed that all the work would be in vain if something was not done. It was either try to defend our way of life or resolve ourselves to live the very life their families had fled."

The man stopped for a moment to wrap his long, thick robe more tightly around himself. As the night wore on the cold penetrated the porous walls and the decreasing temperature made his thoughts more elusive. But still he composed himself and continued with his task. "As time went on, people in this country became more and more divided on the use of force as protection. The society turned more self-centered, and pacifists soon made a noise that could not be ignored. By the time the most dangerous threat to their way of life came to power in the late part of the last century, there was little left for the leaders to do but listen to the shrill cry of the powerful few who convinced people to wait and pray for peace. Even as the time grew nearer and the danger more imminent, it was agreed upon that there was to be no instance that we would sacrifice our lives for and as the hours passed everyone waited...."

"Our confused sense of self-preservation made us lambs. A darkness came over us in the form of a dictatorship and our country became a piece of valuable land constantly warred over, broken apart, and bartered away. Our people were thrown into a state of dazed submission. There was nothing left for those who wanted freedom to hope for and so a separate few tried to leave. Some made it—many more didn't. Since that time we have not governed ourselves but instead we live from ruler to ruler, made slaves by our ancestors’ quest for peace."

The storyteller shifted on his own mat to better position himself. The pain in his legs was worsening and he moved again to find a comfortable position. "What about you and your attempt at freedom?" came the
startling question from a corner of the crowd. "Many say that they still search for you to this day." The man looked towards one of the discolored walls in the back of the room as if to see each scene replay there as he remembered the night that seemed to be in someone else's past; only the severe pain in his crippled legs confirmed his participation. "I did try once to flee from here and begin again the way my grandfather had. Many days, weeks, and months had been spent planning the escape of a small group that wished to head for the mountains. There we would hide until we could find others who hoped for the same sort of future. We were betrayed and greeted at the river by a band of soldiers. The traitor was promised wealth but received the same fate as the rest. Most of us were left for dead. Some of the others were taken to be used for propaganda, as examples of the penalty of trying to escape. They would have been better off dead. And now I am too old to travel the distance to the mountains and their safety.

"I have to believe there will once again be a remarkable generation, one like the early sailors, unafraid of danger, who will feel the need so greatly to risk everything to find a place where they can make decisions for themselves. This generation will have something that others have not—the thirst for freedom and someone whose overwhelming desire will lead them. I was spared that day at the foot of the mountains to believe this."

At this the old man hung his head and waved a hand to dismiss the small assembly. He watched them with envy as they filed out slowly. These would be the ones. There was a need in them. They needed to hear of the past and find hope in it. He smiled as he realized that finally his job was done. He had atoned for his sin of betrayal by searching for and finding the way to make up for what he had done to his friends so many years before. Now their wish would be fulfilled and he would be permitted the rest he had looked so forward to, free from pain and guilt.

The children walked silently out of the rubble and stood at the entrance to the city. Tonight it looked more like the prison it was. As if it called to him, the oldest of the group looked past the disturbing outline of the city to the silhouette of the tallest of the snow-capped mountain peaks that jutted arrogantly into the sky. He picked up the smallest child and looked to each of the faces of his friends. He knew they had the thirst in all of them. He would hope—maybe even pray—that it could be quenched by the coldness of the water running freely in the mountain streams. As they started off across the field, the boy looked back to see the light fade from the old man's window. At the same moment the clouds moved aside, the moon lit a path up the mountain side, a warm breeze propelled them; and he felt the old man with them.

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Happiness
by Michael DeLeone

Together forever

to be as one

nothing's forgotten

the good friends

the fun.