

Wistful and bittersweet, ultimately triumphant, Jennifer Roberson's story takes power, as so many of Roger's did, from allusions to the myths and legends we all share.

MAD JACK

JENNIFER ROBERSON

LUSH, UNDULANT COUNTRYSIDE, VERDIGRISED BY SUMMER into gilt and gold and green. By train the view was fixed, bound by iron rails; by bus as bound but freer, to curve and sweep and angle, to undulate with the countryside like a serpent's tail, undeterred by such transient barricades as stone, as steel, as water.

He smiled. *Nor am I.*

Else he would not now be here, traveling by bus through the lush, undulant countryside of a land not his own, of a people not his own save they bore perhaps more patience with such as he, who understood the secrets of that land. Their secrets, Scottish secrets, though even they might not know this one.

He smiled again, from inside as well as out, aware of the warm clenching of his belly, of anticipation, of excitement.

Maybe this time. . . . Maybe this time it would be true.

But maybe not. It had not been true in all the other journeys, though the smile had been the same inside and out, the warm clenching of his belly. And the anticipation.

"Hope springs eternal?"

But it was *his* hope, his eternal hope springing from deep inside, always, pushing out the fear, the vicious disbelief of his time, of his people, who refused to see such possibilities. To admit there were things in the world that were not *of* the world.

It was so easy to lose belief, to dismiss trust, to deny such things as he had once believed and now needed— very badly—to believe again. Others cloaked it in runes and rituals designed to destroy fancy and replace

it with fact, to label it myth, magic, fantasy: not true, not real, due no place in the world of reality, of responsibility.

He had been real. He had been responsible. The world had closed upon him, and he had welcomed it because it was as they told him it should be. There was no room, no time for fancies, for fantasies; he was a man, an adult; in the parlance of childhood: a *grownup*.

And he had lived among them in the real world, acknowledging and accepting responsibilities of his own making and not; of such small needs as delivering garbage to the curbside, of such larger requisites as delivering a dying child to the hospital.

He had been real, had been responsible, had like a squire embraced the duties of manhood—and yet such dedicated service to that knight had earned him only grief.

—*gilt, and gold, and green*—

Divorced. An ugly word, a filthy word, a word wrought of the power to alter so many lives, too many. But another word was far worse. And that word was death.

His own he could have dealt with, save for the child he would leave behind. Instead, the child had left him. Had left father, mother, all the detritus of a young life as yet filled with myth, with magic, with fantasy—and now was no more than a statistic. A child, asleep in his bed. A car, driving by. And a shot, a single shot: Was it dare? Was it duty?

A sleeping child dying; dead by the time his father carried him into the hospital, where they said it was too late.

And the woman he once had loved, who once had loved him, was cruelly unkind in the ravages of her grief.

His own was unslaked. But he had learned how to ward it away, how to stave it off. A task. A quest. The ultimate fantasy.

His coworkers expressed understanding; his boss called him mad. His friends said he should go for it; the dead child's mother called him mad.

He supposed he was. But it gave him a task, a quest. It gave him leave to do what he felt he had to do, to justify his survival.

Savings, unsaved. Portfolio plundered. None of it mat-tered. There was no child who might benefit from his father's fiscal conservatism, who would attend college without the nagging fear there might not be enough money, or that he would, when he graduated, be in debt for a decade as he labored to pay back what was borrowed.

Instead, what was borrowed had been the decade that comprised the child's life, and the debt had been repaid in the guise of a single bullet.

So many places. So many hopes. So much anticipation, and all as yet for naught. His quest was undertaken but the task remained undone.

The bus slowed. He felt his muscles tighten in familiar anticipation; despite all his travels he had never gained the patience of those who knew debarcation at ten *of* the hour—or after—made no difference at all in the ordering of the world.

In his world, it did.

It might.

It *would*.

Please God, it had to.

The bus stopped. He said, "Let it be here."

Each time, the litany. And each time: disappointment.

"This time," he murmured. "*This* time. Yes."

The door folded open. He had little but himself and one small bag. He and the bag got out of the bus and began the ending of his journey. Yet another journey. Another beginning. Ending. In between, he walked.

"Let it be here," he murmured. "This time. Yes."

Lush, undulant countryside, verdigrised by summer into gilt, and gold, and green. He ate of berries on the bushes beside the asphalt roadway, curving and sweeping through the hills like a serpent's tail, undeterred by such transient barricades as stone, as trees, as water. And water there was aplenty.

Jack studied it as he walked. So many legends told of this water, of

its secrets, of its truths. And yet to look upon it offered no answers, merely the fact of its being.

“Let it be here,” he said.

This time. Yes.

Not so long a walk; he had walked farther. And a castle at the end of it, the ruins of a castle, mortared, mossy stone tumbled in heaps and piles, the remnants of its walls. Grass clothed it now where stone gave way, verdigrised by summer; and beyond it the water, beyond that the sky.

“Here,” he said.

They had come as he had come, the others, but not for this reason: these folk laughed in many languages, carried many cameras, called to the water as if it were a dog to come laloping up to them and collapse upon their feet, panting loyalty.

The water would not come. And what they believed was in it, what they *wanted* to believe, would not answer to such fools as they, and perhaps not even to him.

Let it be here.

The castle skirted the shoreline, but did not quite en-croach. He left them all behind, the laughing strangers camera-weighted, reading aloud of legend, and walked down to the shore. It was a lake fully cognizant of what it was, and what was said of it; he saw it in the cool, quiet confidence, the certitude of its presence and its place in the world.

He set down his bag but did not divest himself of shoes and socks; despite the season, he was born of warmer weather. And it was not in him to pollute the water with his presence.

He waited, and eventually the last bus of the day came and collected the others, and he was left alone. He sat upon a cluster of granite and made himself very still.

“This time,” he murmured. As he had murmured every time. And took from his pocket a handful of dross, that was to him gold.

“Here I am,” he said. Beyond him stretched the sum-mer: *gilt and gold and green*. “This time,” he begged. As he had begged before.

But this time was different. This time he did not think of the dead boy but of the other boy, the only boy, the lonely boy; who was, he supposed, very much like the dead boy, but wasn't.

Although perhaps he *was* dead, if in a different way; the kind of dead that happens when a boy becomes a man, when myth and magic and fantasy are replaced by the swordblade of reality, the knife called responsibility.

That boy too was dead, albeit his heart yet beat. That boy too was dead, in heart, in soul, in mind; but his death needn't be permanent. His day to be buried in the cold, broken ground had not yet come upon him.

"Mad Jack," he murmured; what would they say of him now, to see him like this?

He laughed. But very softly.

And the water laughed back.

At first he could give it no credence. But then he re-moved himself from reality, despite his physicality, and listened more closely, more deeply, to the voice of the water, the rhythm of its silence.

Wind chafed his scalp, lifting grief-grayed hair. Wind slewed by his ears, seducing like a lover: here, there, an-other where, then back again to kiss.

And his head was filled with the elusive fragrance of fantasy, the subversive *mélange* of myth.

"It *was* true," he said. "Once. Before I permitted the world to make me blind, to fill my ears with the cacophony of a life I never aspired to."

But no. He had aspired. As all the others aspired, as they had been shaped to aspire, and also to desire.

Bound by shore, by hills, by trees, the water stretched before him: slate and steel and silver. Summer now was banished in the setting of the sun.

"Let it be here," he begged.

And the water acquiesced.

With a hiss of froth on sand, with the tumult of wave on stone, it ran up the shore to his feet. He tensed, but did not move. And when it engulfed his shoes, when it soaked his feet, when it stole away his treasure of strings and sealing wax he did not curse, but rejoiced. Displacement was necessary: water giving up so much required itself to submit, to permit such contained upheaval as the beast, as if it sounded, shouldered through the pale between surface and the air.

It came, did the beast, like a hound to its master's hand, a hand too long denied by far too many years. It came not because he called it as the others had called, but because he had need of it, because his spirit recalled what joys had bound them once, what adventures they had shared, when kings and princes bowed; when pirate ships lowered sails.

Up from the water it came, shaking wing-clad shoulders, snorting through flaring nostrils. The great opaline eye rolled within its socket, beneath the incongruity of delicate, wirelike lashes tempered to gold in the crucible of sunset.

“Oh,” Jack breathed, “Oh, but I'd *forgotten*—”

Forgotten everything that now was recalled, and cherished for the memories as much as he grieved for loss.

Fine arched toes broke free of the shoreline froth, and each nail glistened. The scales of the flesh were tightly closed to shed water, sun-heated in the decay of the day like iron within the furnace, an argent heart shining in it ocher and amber and bronze.

The scales of his flesh: *gilt, and gold, and green.*

The glistening verdigrised haunches remained in water; there was no room for more upon the scarpment of shore. And the tail, the serpentlike tail, curved itself across stone, sliced determinedly through sand to touch a shod foot, to drape in blissful familiarity as a dog's paw, wholly undeterred by such transient barricades as a man's shoes, and his tears.

Through them, Mad Jack laughed.

Not Nessie. Never. “Hello, Puff,” he said.

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AFTERWORD

I first met Roger in the flesh in 1992, although I'd known him for years via his books, both as a reader and as a bookstore clerk making sure his titles were kept in stock. I was on my way to a small Southern con where Roger and I both were scheduled as special guests—though the idea of *sharing* billing with Roger Zelazny was inconceivable to me.

And then I met the man, who was sweet and kind and shy and gentle; who went out of his way to put me at ease by simply being himself; who made a point of coming to my reading to encourage and support me. I survived having Roger in the audience, barely; but he said sweet and kind and gentle things when I was done, leaving me to feel worthy after all.

We met a few times after that at various cons, spent some time together, spoke a few times on the phone. I was in awe of the man and the talent, which I think he knew. I *hope* he knew. Because awe carries with it its own homage. And Roger deserves that. From all of us.