

A Mythic Fear of the Sea by Jay Lake

THE MORNING OF THE DAY I turned twelve years old, Daddy brought out the crampons and the skin-spikes.

“Little Ozzie,” he said in that rough-burred voice I’d always loved, “it’s time.”

I had no need to ask, *time for what?* Even at twelve, I knew we had all the time in the world and none. My grandfather loomed over our little town, his long shadow creeping across our fields and orchards with every day’s setting of the sun. He guarded us all around, kept the water away, fed us when times were lean, kept our souls safe within our bodies.

It was time to meet Granddaddy.

We went out to the kitchen, fetched some guavas in their canning jars and a rope-slung pot of sour milk—which would keep through the day’s heat, as it was already half-bad, though the stuff never sat well in my tummy. I reached for the twists of beaver jerky, but Daddy shook his head. “We’ll dine on the old man’s grace,” he rumbled with a smile which was for him small and secret.

So I followed him out through the yard, limping between the pumpkin and squash vines, and into the sole street our town still claimed. I was surprised to see everyone in the world there, smiling, laughing, sipping hot chickory from china cups and toasting me with all the good will of a happy funeral.

“Good day, Ozzie!” shouted Miss Kermant, our teacher.

Old Doc Liang grinned, showing his silver teeth, then bowed, never spilling a drop.

The Boordma twins, trapped forever in a lumpish childhood I never had quite trusted, grinned and hooted.

And so it went through the town, until every one of our fifty-seven people had sent me off. Mom was last.

She knelt before me, so that I could see the top of her head where the hair was thin as wheat in a winter field. “Ozzie,” Mom whispered, then hugged me. “We all love you. Even ... *him.*”

And that was it. It remained only for Daddy and me to pass through a desert of empty pavement, streets like angular arteries leading between blackberry brambles and into fern breaks. In some places the pavement had aged faster than others,

Douglas firs already spearing the sky from broken beds of stone, while others looked as if they had just yesterday seen their last wagon. In those places even the tiny, round-shouldered spirit guides seemed fresh-painted, their little chain beards scraping in the wind of my farewell.

All children visit Granddaddy. Some haunt the slopes below his vast, rumpled trousers, chasing hares and pheasants through the thinning brush. Others play tag or hide-and-go-seek among the drifting lint of his sweater, where the stuff has caught on an aspen forest. There are secret places known only to the fraternity of children where you can even stand and hear the susurrating echo of the distant, forbidden, angry sea. It as if the sound travels by secret paths through the folds of Granddaddy's skin, or perhaps arrives on his breath that draws and shudders once every year or so.

We all visit him, and we all avoid him at the same time. Though one eye is lost where his face is propped within the reach of his upper arm, the other can be seen below its vasty wrinkled lid, moving slow as the moon in the summer sky with the rhythm of his dreams.

Jamie Brautigan told me Granddaddy dreamed of the sea, and his dream *was* the sea. I thought that was stupid—how could your dream be anything besides a thought in your head?—but Jamie's words stayed with me.

Approaching the Lower Right Sleeve with Daddy, I began to believe what she had said. Even among the shadowed forest of lint and dying aspen, which smelled of nothing so much as wet, old tobacco, I could hear that soft and distant rhythm.

“Daddy...”

“Hmm?” He'd stopped to wipe the early sweat from his brow and check our path. Even though this was my trip, Daddy's attention was on something far ahead and far away. Mom always said that was just how he was.

A dreamer, like Granddaddy.

“I can hear the sea.” I was ashamed of the words as soon as I said them.

“Ozzie.” He looked at me, caught me with those eyes the color of cold water. Then, to my surprise: “It's all right, son. Walk, don't think.” His voice was kind.

Walk. Don't think.

I walked without thinking a while.

The Lower Right Sleeve wasn't a particular challenge. Jamie and I had climbed almost all the way to the Crook when we were both ten, before she turned eleven and became too old to play with me, especially when Mannie Vingh started paying attention to her. But the Crook itself, there was a challenge.

Granddaddy's sweater had begun to rot there, and ravel. It was like a wool mine, source of much of the lint on the lower slopes. Great foetid pits interrupted the weave which clothed his arm, pits that we had to pick our way around with frustrating care. There were mites up here, slow, pale things the size of cows, but their jaws could crush a grown man's torso, so it didn't do to fall down their dark holes.

All of it made for slow going, but Daddy simply walked like time was his to command. I followed, wondering what it would be like to finally meet the old man.

Soon enough the pits and the troubled surface of the sweater gave way to a vast crevice. The fold of the Crook. It was dark as any of the mite-dens, but much more huge. The far side rose at a steep slope, nearly a cliff, to meet the wrinkled network of the top of Granddaddy's head where he had it pillowed on his arm.

"How are we going to cross that?" I asked.

"Faith, patience and skill," Daddy replied with another of his not-so-secret smiles. He unslung one of his skin-spikes and handed it to me. The thing was perhaps four feet long, with a curved hook at one end and handle at the other, and a leather thong. He took the other in his own right hand, slipping the thong over his wrist.

I stared from his to mine and back again. "Faith, patience, skill and a skin-spike?"

"And a skin-spike."

Then Daddy scrambled down the steepening slope, facing close to the nap of the sweater, snagging the skin-spike in among the weave for balance.

I learned to climb that morning, down into the Crook and back up.

Later we stopped for guavas and sour milk in a fold that rubbed up against the skin of Granddaddy's scalp. It was hot by then, and Daddy sweated a river. Something in the salt smell of him seemed to bring the sea that much closer, or maybe it was Granddaddy's great, slow pulse echoing behind me.

I'd never touched the old man's skin before.

It was a wall of leathery warmth that towered hundreds of feet above my head to disappear behind the curve of his skull. So close, the skin was composed of a mosaic of little islands of pale tan, ringed with paler canals. I studied the back of my own hand. Surely there was that same pattern—as if I in turn were built from tiny bricks of leather. Great brown blotches interrupted the curving surface of his head, liver spots each bigger than our house.

And Granddaddy was warm. He was warm like the ashes of the Beltaine bonfire. He was warm like the mown fields of autumn. He was warm like the sun upon my face.

Beneath my hand I felt the life of a man who was a mountain to his people. I leaned forward and kissed his scalp.

Daddy chuckled. "You're getting closer to him, Little Ozzie. Ready to climb."

And so we left our boots behind, strapped on crampons, and ascended that wall of liver-spotted skin.

You set the spike in one of the pale canals between the leathery islands. You move one foot up, wedge it in another canal with the crampons. Move the free hand, searching for some rough grip. Move the other foot. Set the spike again.

This is how you climb Granddaddy's head. If he'd had hair, it might have been easier, but then there would have been mites.

And when you stop and rest, body pressed flat against his vast and ancient scalp, you can hear the sea echoing deep inside, and even smell the salt.

It was the hardest, most fearful day of my life. Daddy said nothing, just climbed ahead of me.

We finally crested the dome and came to a place where I could stand and walk. Everything hurt, as if I'd been rolling down hillsides for hours. Daddy pointed to a distant, curving wall.

"We'll make for the ear," he said. "That's where we need to be."

So I trudged after my father, toward the temple and the ear, through thin

spears of gray hair that erupted from the skin from time to time. There was dirt up here too, blown by the wind, and little plants had taken root. Someday the old man would be a forest.

Daddy didn't take his crampons off, so I kept mine on as well. It felt strange to sink into Granddaddy's skin with each step, but he was so vast that perhaps he never took note of our passage at all.

When we finally got to the shadow of the ear, Daddy sat down. "Rest, son," he said, and began hacking in to a reddened fold of skin. I watched, both horrified and fascinated, as Daddy grinned and added, "The old man's grace."

Strips of flesh tore free from the wound with the sound of ripping cloth. Daddy handed me one, then began chewing on another. I stared at it—something like a red licorice rope, but damp. Not bloody, just damp.

My stomach jumped hard, the sour milk rebelling.

"Take of him and be comforted," Daddy said around a mouthful of meat.

So I touched it to my lips, this stringy relic of Granddaddy, and gnawed a tiny shred. It tasted salty, like the sea was said to taste, but sweet, too, like springwater drunk in the shade of summer. Then I found sour, and the thick taste of meat, and the dance of chocolate.

Granddaddy tasted like the world.

Slowly I ate of him, until my strip of meat was gone and my belly was full. The milk in my gut settled and I felt better.

Then we climbed the winding path of the ear. Hairs like great swords rose up to block our path, and boulders of brown wax, but Daddy marched on. There was a new spring in his step, as if the old man's grace had made of my father something new.

After a while I realized I was bouncing after him.

The upper rim of the ear was a narrow path that shook beneath our weight. To my right was an overhanging curl that dropped down into a sort of fleshy spiral which in turn descended to a dark, hairy vortex.

To my left was ... the sea.

I'd always thought Douglas firs were large. Great trees that speared the sky, they grew throughout our little valley. I'd always thought Granddaddy was large, his bulk like a mountain protecting us all the way around.

But the sea went on forever. It passed into a distance that made my stomach lurch all over again, sparkling silver and blue and gray, and it *moved*. It was a live thing, bigger than the world, and everywhere around me.

Granddaddy didn't just lie on each side of our little town. He lay around it, like a cat curled on a hearth, and his back and legs kept the sea from swallowing us whole. Like a beaver damming a creek, Granddaddy dammed the world out.

Daddy's hand took my shoulder. "Here is the old man's secret."

"That he keeps the sea out," I whispered. Terror of the distant, salty water was turning my knees to butter.

"No." Daddy's fingers tightened. "That the sea keeps him in. Listen, son. He is not our protector, he is our terror. If he were ever to waken, his feet would crush our town to dust. His voice is the whirlwind, Little Ozzie. So we climb here to pray to him to remain asleep for ever, and to thank the sea for wrapping him so tight in salty comfort."

Daddy was wrong, I knew he was wrong, but the sight of that endless sea around me, rising to meet the sky, heaving like a mad, live thing, had struck away what was left of my voice.

In the end I could neither pray to Granddaddy nor thank the sea. It was a thing bigger than me, bigger than anything in the world should be. My father had to hoist me onto his shoulders and carry me down, I was so taken by my fear, though climb pick-a-back terrified us both. I was past caring.

Step by step we walked into town in the deepening dusk. People smiled from porches, then turned away at a slight shake of Daddy's head. I mostly watched my feet kick the brittle-veined ghosts of leaves out of the way. It was easier than meeting disappointed eyes.

By the time we reached our own yard with its ankle-high forest of pumpkins and squash, Mom must have had the news. There were no lanterns lit, and though I could smell cake fresh from the oven, it wasn't laid out in celebration.

"Little Ozzie," she said, then knelt down to hug me.

"Lies." The first word I'd spoken since leaving the ear, and it made my mother burst into tears.

"He's too young," Daddy said from behind me, his voice rough. He reached

for my shoulder, that gripping hug, but his hand faltered and it became a soft slap.

“This is something we all do, honey,” Mom whispered to me. Her voice shuddered like a wood saw.

“It can’t...” I couldn’t answer her. I took a deep breath. “It can’t be true.” Visions of an impossible silver immensity filled my head. Like a puddle, grown to overwhelm all of existence. “The sea is too ... big.”

“I’ll put him to bed with some strong tea,” she told Daddy, talking over my head as if I were already nothing.

After that the grown-ups were kind to me, kind they way they were to the Boordma twins. I hated it. Miss Kermant suggested I spend more time in the library. If I came and went from school at odd hours, no one threw apples or walnuts at me in the street.

I read about water. Rain, and streams, and the ecology of ponds. Slowly I worked my way up to bigger water. If there was a thing as impossible as the sea in the world, it must be in the library.

And it was. *Pelagic Argosy*, by Wolfe Jeanison, a book that drove me to the dictionary time and again, full of prophecy and portent. And weirder books, *A Gift From the Sea*, for example, that spoke of tide pools and beaches and island shores.

There were pictures of boats.

I realized that I would sooner go live in the woods and eat squirrels than climb to Granddaddy’s ear again. But a boat. That was something else.

Maybe the sea wasn’t so big up close. Maybe that had been an illusion.

I spent the autumn building model boats to sail on forest streams and nameless ponds, filching adult tools when I could.

I would build me a boat, I resolved, and cross over my fear. I would show them all.

By the following summer I was living in a lint cave near Granddaddy’s Waist. Daddy hadn’t spoken to me in months, though Mom brought me tea bags and home-baked bread from time to time. When I went into town, I was a ghost. Miss Kermant smiled sometimes, and Boordma twins squalled and pointed, but no one

else met my eye, touched me. People just stepped aside when I walked toward them.

Granddaddy had started rumbling during the winter.

Was it my refusal to pray? What had disturbed the old man? The sooner the town was rid of me, the happier everyone would be, including himself.

But I had a keel, tucked in a trouser fold somewhat kneeward of the waist. Close enough to the water for me to lower my boat off the seaward cliffs, but far enough that I didn't have to look. The swishing of wind and tide—I had learned that word, "tide," from the library—was bad enough. The reek of iodine and salt was worse. I would not look at that silvered horizon.

"Horizon," another word our town had never needed to teach me.

My keel had ribs, and planks were curing over slow fires hidden several places in the forests that lined the intersection of pants and earth.

The sail was the hardest part. That next autumn I went to see Mom.

Granddaddy's rumbling had become a sort of wheezing roar by then, a distant storm that never quite passed on out of hearing.

When I entered town, I was stared at. Glared at. Hands cupped over mouths as secrets were whispered. Children I had known followed me with sticks.

She waited on the porch of my family's house. Daddy was nowhere to be seen.

"Mom, I..." My voice was harsh, squeaking like a crow. I realized I hadn't spoken in months.

"Your father can take you back up there," she said.

"No."

There was a rustle, the feathers of a hundred birds, at my word. She glanced toward the Head, out of sight behind the bulk of the house. "Everyone says it's you."

"Maybe. I'm doing something about it, though." It was the first time I'd admitted my plans, to even having plans.

"What?" Mom's nerve raveled, her voice rising in fear. "Are you going to

climb and pray? Put him back to a sound sleep before he does *something*?"

"No!"

The crowd that had followed me moaned.

"You will be the death of us," Mom said. "When Granddaddy awakens."

"Fine! Give me six yards of stout canvas, and I will never trouble you again."

Then a voice as big as the world said, "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO..." and my former friends began to beat me.

I awoke, stiff, sore, itching from cuts and bruises, covered with an enormous blanket. Nearby, people whispered.

No, I realized. It was my canvas, and I lay in the hull of my little boat listening to the sea. Someone had carried me here, and brought the cloth as well.

I sat up to find Daddy squatting by a small fire. He was preparing to roast a bird.

"Sooner gone, sooner done," he said without meeting my eye.

I glanced upleg, toward the Waist and the vast curve of Granddaddy's bulk beyond. "Is he moving?"

It was almost like having a normal conversation.

"Mayor Fentress swears the Fingers are twitching." The bird sizzled as it went over the flames. "There's a lot of talk about what should be done ... hard talk, Little Ozzie."

I climbed out of my boat and laid my sail flat, thinking. Only one ridge of flannel, and the fall of the thigh backs, separated my boat from her water. Then Daddy and the rest of the town could have the rumbling, grumbling old man to themselves.

All I had to do was go down to the sea in my boat. My gut jellied at the prospect.

"It's only a prayer, son," Daddy whispered.

"No." I had to go, to prove the world wasn't as impossibly big as it seemed.

I took my shears and my needles and began to sew my sail. After a time, Daddy helped.

In the end, we hauled the boat up to the last ridge. Daddy braced the lines while I picked and sliced more threads from the weave of Granddaddy's trousers. My boat slid down the slope of the old man's thighs, out of my sight, away from Granddaddy and toward the salty, murmuring sea.

When the line went slack, it was my turn.

"I love you," Daddy said. His face was red, sweat beading on it, the rope of threads wrapped around his waist as if he were a Hero of Industry from one of the old engravings in the library.

"Tell Mom..." I began, but I could think of nothing to say.

He smiled. "I know."

"And..." Again, words fled my mouth unsaid.

Daddy just shook my hand, then nodded past me at the direction of my future.

Then I followed my boat down, staring at the heaving, living skin of the sea, the white-flecked veins of foam, the strange silver shadows which crossed the water. Even then, I would not raise my eyes to the impossible horizon.

Daddy was tiny against the sky, waving. I wished him the joy of life in the circle of Granddaddy's iron will, and turned to face the edge of the world. Though my stomach wrenched and my head made my head ache, smiling I set my course away from the old man and into the compass quarter of my greatest fears.

How deep was the sea, I wondered?