

Jack Of All Trades

He was a simple man. He had only one plate in his house, one fork, one knife, a teaspoon and a tablespoon, which is all a lonely man needs in form of cutlery, in order to have a civilized meal. He also had a pair of rusty old bicycles, which served him loyally on his incessant quest of roaming the country, and a deep, black, bottomless well in his back yard. An old faded hat that was once blue under the layers of dust, and the passing of the years, always adorned his head, and that was pretty much it.

Because Jack was a simple man.

He did, however, have that sack. A brown, linen sack it was, tied up at the top with a yellow thread. It seemed quite ordinary on the outside, but there was absolutely nothing ordinary about the contents of that sack. They had no shape, nor smell nor color. It was Jack's most important possession.

It was a sunny autumn day, when Jack slowly climbed his way up a dusty, lonely hill, his sack tied firmly on his back, and his rusted bicycle moaning and groaning under his feet. The air was warm, for the tail end of summer still lingered upon the land, breathing its final hot breaths into the waking hours of day.

Jack had climbed upon that hill many times before. But it only got more difficult as the years flew by, and time took its merciless toll on the metal, and the wheels, the bones and the joints. The rust became only rustier, as the bicycles became only older. The joints ached all the more at nights, and the muscles could bare only less.

Jack halted and wiped the sweat off his brow, catching his breath. All around him wild green fields stretched, and trees grew with their slim branches naked of leaves. Before him the white road climbed higher up the hill, offering nothing but more struggle. Stark silence enveloped everything, disturbed only by the constant chirping of crickets, and Jack's strenuous breathing. *This is not for my age any more*, he thought to himself. Then, fastening the sack upon his back, he began walking, his bicycle by his side.

The road ended eventually, as all roads do, and the hill offered its top, where a house stood lonely and far from everything in the world, quietly watching the flying clouds in the far, blue skies. Stopping at the top of that hill, panting and wiping his cracked old face, Jack stood looking at the house, and at the little garden of red flowers that bloomed gaily in its miniature, happy world, and sighed deeply. It was a sigh one makes at the end of an arduous climb, the kind of a sigh one heaves before delving into yet another tiresome conversation, which was already made so many times before. A conversation that always ended in the same way.

There was a man standing outside of the house, looking at the valleys that lay before him, looking at the far horizon where the clouds gathered and churned into mountains. The man's white shirt fluttered in the breeze that blew on the hill, his blue hair stood erect like flames of a blue fire, glistening in the autumn sun. Jack hoisted his sack on his back, and walked to where the man was standing.

"Hallo Nick," he said to the man.

"Hello," said Nick.

"Such a nice view you have today," said Jack, looking down at the valleys below.

Nick turned his gaze back to the desolated land that stretched from one horizon to another. "It is nice, isn't it?" he said, and then turned to look at Jack, somewhat lost. "I'm sorry," he said, "do I know you?"

Jack smiled, "You do." He chuckled, "Very well actually."

"Is that so?"

"I come here every day, Nick. I have been coming here for years."

Nick stared at Jack, puzzled.

"But you don't remember me," continued Jack, "You remember nothing of yesterday's happening. You won't remember me tomorrow. You won't remember we even had this conversation."

"That is unfortunate," said Nick.

Jack looked at Nick's face. His smooth, ageless face. He looked at his blue, flame-like hair that stood straight and unmoving in the breeze. Time did not touch Nick, and Jack had no notion of his age. Nick could have been thousands of years old, or, so much younger than him. There was no way for Jack to tell. Rules of time did not apply to Nick.

"I am Jack," he introduced himself, just as he did so many times before.

“Nice meeting you Jack,” said Nick, “What can I do for you?”

“I came here,” said Jack, “because I wish to make a trade with you.”

“What kind of a trade?” asked Nick.

He had been there so many times. So many times he climbed up that hill, to be greeted by a gust of playful winds, greeted by that red garden of flowers, growing so oblivious to everything.

So many times he repeated the same words: ‘I would like to make a trade with you’. So many times he stood guessing at Nick’s age, studying his clear blue eyes. Like a frozen stream they always seemed to Jack. So many times he had been there.

And Nick never remembered.

He was too old for this, Jack always thought. His back ached, his old bones seemed to want to break each time he reached the top of that hill. It wasn’t getting easier. He wasn’t getting any younger. But he kept on. Nick had what he wanted, what he needed.

“Time, Nick,” explained Jack, “we are talking about time.”

“Time?”

“You have time, and I want it.”

“I see,” smiled Nick. He returned his blue gaze to the far horizon, his hands folded behind his back, his demeanor calm and peaceful. The same way he had always been.

“You said you wanted to make a trade,” Nick went on, “That means you must have something that I might want in return.”

“I do,” asserted Jack, “in that sack of mine.”

“And what would that be?” asked Nick.

“Anything. Anything you want. Anything you could possibly dream of, I have, and can trade with you.”

“Is that so?”

“I have all you’d ever wish for.”

“Except time,” said Nick, smiling.

“Except time.”

“I see,” he said quietly.

“I am getting old, Nick,” explained Jack. “My body aches. My eyes are getting weak. My fingers shake. If I had time, none of that would matter. Because I would be able to bend all those rules,” Jack said, repeating a repeat of a repeat of a repeat of all those conversations made so many times before.

“You can’t trade time,” Nick laughed quietly.

“Nothing is untradeable,” Jack said. “There was never a trade I wasn’t able to make in this world, in exchange for something I desired. I can give you everything you’ve ever wanted.” Nick smiled. And then, with his clear blue eyes fixed before him, he said, “I’ll make you a deal. If you come here again and I remember you, this conversation, and this promise that I am about to make, then I will trade time with you for whatever my heart desires the most, and time shall be yours forever. To give, or to keep.”

“I will remember this,” Jack affirmed, “and I will be back, Nick.”

And so, Jack turned away and made his way back down the hill, through the cool woods where a stream chimed like a thousand bells, through the yellow fields of wheat, and back to his home, where a deep, black, bottomless well stood, bellying the most horrible secret in the world (but that is a different story altogether. And a terrible one too.)

Night came and brought a new morning at its end, to dawn upon the world and consume the night. And again, up the hill climbed Jack, a little older, feeling less hopeful. The autumn winds blew even colder, though the sweat glistened thin on Jack’s forehead. Again he found himself walking beside his old bicycle. Again the house greeted him at the top of the hill.

Again, the same promises.

“If you come here again, and I remember you-”

“I will be back Nick.”

And back he was, on the following morning, and the three mornings that resulted. The days became only colder, and Jack’s bones ached only more. The winds bit only deeper through the clothes, and stung the skin. Then came the snow, falling soft and clean, and covering all with silence. But Jack kept on all the same. That would be his final trade, he swore, he promised.

And on through the snow he shuffled, and dragged his old feet. The days passed, and the faint sun rose again above the cold world. Then the weeks passed, and the promises were made again and again, and were lost and gone into the frozen winds.

The snow fell, heavy and thick it covered the earth, and all the roads closed. By the fire then Jack sat, warming his heart, getting older, dreaming of a one trade he could never make. More nights came and went, and more days went by. Then a brighter sun rose, and melted the snows and cleared up the roads, until finally came the first day of spring, to bloom upon the world.

Into this morning awoke Jack, his head full of dreams about a hill, and a garden of red. All bent and aching he came out of his house, and filled his lungs with the fresh air of the first day of spring. With a shaking hand he gripped his walking cane, for he could no longer ride his bicycle- that was just as old and shaky as he-, and made his way over the naked fields, across the stream that was flowing so clear, ripe with the melting snows from the mountains. Through the waking woods he made his way, and slowly, very slowly, up the hill.

Up

Up

Up

The hill.

And there he stood. Waiting for him. In his white blouse, and his blue hair shining in the spring sun. Ageless and timeless, and eternal as always, at the top of the hill waited Nick. Waited for Jack to come.

And Jack came. His brown linen sack riding over his caving shoulders, feeling older than ever, feeling exhausted and tired, and worn out.

“Hello Jack,” said Nick as Jack approached, his eyes, as always, fixed upon the world below him. But Jack’s voice would not word out his thoughts, and he stood bent and aching, and unable to speak.

“I have been waiting for you today,” said Nick. “Today a memory came to me,” he continued, “and I remembered a promise.”

There was a long silence, and long it lasted, like misery.

“I believe I have something you want,” Nick finally said.

"You do," Jack said lowly, his voice small and whispering.

"And in exchange for that," Nick said, "you will give me what my heart desires the most?"

"I will. Anything," Jack promised. "Anything at all."

"Very well."

Nick turned and faced Jack, and his far gaze fell clear and blue, like a frozen stream, on Jack's old eyes. His face bore no marks of time. His ageless features revealed nothing at all. He was infinite.

"Then I shall tell you my heart's deepest desire, and we shall make this trade, as I pledged," Nick said. "For I know that today, and today only, I will remember this promise."

Jack stood bent over his walking cane, his hands trembling, his heart aching. This conversation was made in his dreams only. In his heart's deepest yearning. He wasn't certain that it wasn't merely another dream.

"Why now? After all these years, Nick?" Jack's voice trembled, "Why today?"

But Nick only laughed, and then he smiled. And without further words- for all promises must be kept- Nick told Jack his heart's deepest desire, the deepest of his wishes. And Jack's old eyes welled up with tears, and his vision blurred.

Because it was so very simple.

And it was so very plain.

"Is that it?" Jack asked, and his words trembled. "Is that all?"

Nick only smiled again, and his timeless face shone under the spring sun. His hair burned in blue flames, his eyes cool, like a stream running high and full with the fresh water of melting snow.

"That is all."