

The Leper

The Leper

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What do you do when hope becomes both your enemy - and your only lifeline?

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I clutched the sturdy walking stick weakly with both hands and slid one foot laboriously ahead of the other. Dust plumed up around me as I peered down the dusty road through the strips of rotted garment I had wrapped around my face long ago. Matching strips encased my hands, but I could barely feel the binding material or the stick my fingers were squeezing. The feeling had since faded from my hands and my feet almost entirely. The scorching sun was doubly merciless beneath the concealing cloak that had become my identity. It was an identity shared by the others like me. But I really didn't know them, and they didn't know each other or myself. We weren't friends, congregated together of our own free will; we were strangers thrust upon each other because we were outcasts, feared and loathed...diseased.

I watched my own wrapped feet scuff through the thick dust. I didn't raise my head to see how far I still had left to go. If I looked over my shoulder, the fenced village would still be within view. How far had I come since I had pushed my way weakly through the high gates for the first time in five years? Fifteen feet? Twenty? Already my useless body threatened to collapse. I thought about turning back, but five-year-old images danced through my mind, urging me on. Images I hadn't allowed myself to think about since the day I came to the fenced village. But I tentatively let the faces emerge in my mind once again and discovered that five years of suppressing them had not faded their beauty and innocence. My wife's pretty smile and warm dark eyes filled me with longing and stung my eyes with tears. Baby Anna and little Jacob, still basking in their innocence and youth. With each forced step, a new memory surfaced to strengthen my next; Jacob bursting out the front door as I came in from the fields, leaping into my arms; cuddling baby Anna close to my chest as she clung to my fingers with her tiny fists. And lovely Rebecca. Even now, I could still feel her comforting arms holding me close, her caressing touch. Her love had been unshakable, undying. Even at the end.

I squeezed my eyes shut as I shuffled forward. My hell had begun the day I tried to pick up Anna and found my hands no longer possessed the strength to do so. Then the lesions began to appear and I could no longer deny the truth. To do so would have been to put my family in mortal danger. My good-byes to my cherished family had been in words alone. I could not touch them, hold them close one last time or even kiss their cheeks. And when Jacob fought his mother's arms and begged me not to go, I was unable to comfort him. Five years of living in exile, away from the only life I had ever known, had not been as hard as turning my back on the tearful little boy who wanted only to feel his father's arms hold him close and tell him everything was going to be okay. The second hardest thing I'd had to do came about on the day that Rebecca had shown up at the village gates. I had went to the gates but didn't go out. The tears in my beautiful Rebecca's eyes had only shattered me more when she swore her love to me forever and told me she would beat the gates of Heaven until the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob heard her plea for her husband's healing. But I had sent her away, making her promise not to come there again. Our life was over and to let her think otherwise would have been a grave wrong. To encourage her to pray and exist on hope would have been just as wrong. Since the creation of man, no one had ever been healed of such a disease. It was not possible.

I faltered in my steps. Was I making a mistake? The city streets were not a place for a man of my offensive estate. When my feet and legs had surged with strength, and I had walked those streets with confidence, I had not missed the looks on the faces of the town's folks when a diseased shell of a man showed up in town. Folks cringed and hid their children away, they walked on the far sides of the street to avoid being inflicted. But I had to go on. The whispered rumors that had drifted back to the village of unwanted souls could not be ignored. Not by me, a man with nothing to lose and so much to gain. The others, imprisoned there by both their condition and fear of belief, had watched with pity when I had shoved my way out of the gates and

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slowly started for town. Perhaps underneath it all, they wanted to believe as well, but hope had become their enemy. When the hopeless began to hope, it only enhanced their hellish existence. But what if the rumors were true? I was willing to risk the torture of hope unfulfilled for even the slightest chance to touch my loved ones again.

The desperate courage I had summoned faltered suddenly when I came to the well-used road that would take me into town. My kind was not welcome there. Unlucky souls had been chosen to bring us food, but they came only as far as the gates and they came at night when we were all tangled within our tortured dreams of a life stolen away from us. I stayed up one night, just to see someone from the other side of our dark veil. They crept in like a thief, cloaked from head to toe. I could not tell if it was man or woman. The two-wheeled cart drawn by a young ass carried baskets and bundles of food. Food that had begun to spoil and was no longer deemed fit to sell to normal folk. This was the food given to us. I had watched the cloaked figure hurriedly drag the commodities off the cart and stow them just inside the gate, without entering themselves. They kept the cloak pressed tight to their face, as if breathing the same air as us would inflict them with our infirmities, condemn them to the same torturous fate as ourselves. I had contemplated approaching the person suddenly and without warning, just to see what the reaction would be. But I kept my distance and didn't let them know I was watching.

I stood on the roadside for a long time, leaning on my staff. No one came or went. I wondered where they were. Never was this road completely deserted as it was today. Where had everyone gone to? I lowered my eyes to the hardened surface stretching away before me, and stared at the thin layer of dust through the decaying cloth that had impaired my vision for so long. In the dust were footprints of those who had passed by yesterday, or possibly this morning. Footprints of all sizes. Children had walked this road recently, certainly whispering to each other of the village of the walking dead at the end of this side road. It had been so long since I'd seen a child that I was willing to risk the horror in their expression just to look at one. But I hadn't ventured from the fenced village in search of a child.

I could feel my strength draining as I stood there and I wondered how far down the road I would make it before I collapsed. It wouldn't be far. Instead of attempting the walk, I sank down in a heap at the edge of roadway. Had someone ventured by, they might have mistaken me for nothing more than a bundle of rotted garments. But was I anymore than that? This hope that had walked me out the gates and down the dusty road that was little more than a path and brought me here...had faded. There was no hope for the damned. My family was forever lost to me, and it filled me with despair to realize I was only now beginning to grasp that horrifying understanding. I would never hold my children again. I would never again feel the love in my Rebecca's embrace. I was one of the walking dead that the children whispered about. All I had left to look forward to was death. And I did.

My weakened arms slid up over my head as I bowed toward my knees and wept. Wept for the dreams that had been stolen from me, for the love of a family that surely saw me now as merely a dark shadow of a tortured past. I wept for the hope I had clung to when I'd walked out those gates. For the first time in five years, I had never felt so alive as I did the moment that hope took hold of me. Now I longed for it to come back to me. But it wouldn't be returning, for a reality I had somehow evaded all these years had suddenly hit me; I was dead. In mind, in spirit, and soon...in body as well.

I huddled there in the dust, unmoving, my staff resting on the ground beside me as the torturous sunlight baked my decaying form. The weeping faded as the well of tears deep within slowly dried and left me as barren and cracked as a desert floor, pummeled mercilessly by a scorching, dry wind. The tears were gone, but the ache grew stronger. My chest tightened painfully as if squeezed by a mighty force bent on crushing what was left of my useless life. Gasping, I sucked in a lung full of hot, dusty air then immediately began to gag. I bent forward as a series of raspy coughs racked my aching body. And deep within my tortured soul, I prayed to the God of my ancestors for the first time in five years. I prayed for His mercy to end my suffering, though

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I couldn't help but wonder if my suffering would ever cease.

When a sudden shadow fell across my huddled form, I tentatively peered out from beneath my shielding arm. Somehow a crowd had appeared on the road without me noticing. And yet, suddenly, the murmurs of the crowd were deafening. I raised my head and stared. No one noticed me there and I was thankful. Dust spoofered into the air as scores of feet thumped down the road. They weren't just folks casually heading for town. They moved forward with purpose, with eagerness. Many were stretching out their arms, reaching. When I chanced a look at their faces, I saw that their eyes were alive with hope. Many of the faces were streaked with tears that spilled from glowing eyes. I cowered back and ducked my head. The ache swelled inside me, and the crushing force in my chest tightened fiercely. I longed for the hope, the joy, in that sea of faces. I hungered for it. Envied it. I squeezed my eyes shut as the crowd flowed past me.

For the briefest of moments, I sensed eyes on me and the urge to look up was nearly unbearable, but I forced my head to stay down. I feared what I would see. Not the fear of rejection. I was accustomed to rejection. But it was a new kind of fear that invaded my heart. The fear of believing the impossible. I stayed where I was, head down, eyes shut tight, until I felt the eyes leave me and move on. But though they were no longer looking at me, I could still feel the weight of their gaze.

Slowly, I raised my head as the last remnant of the crowd was passing by. Against my own will, my eyes slid to the front, searching, seeking. But for what? For who? But I knew, didn't I? I was searching for the one who had looked at me. The only one, I knew, that had even noticed me there on the side of the road. For five years, I had been invisible, a hateful reminder of the dark side of life. For five years, eyes had avoided me...even the eyes of those like myself, just as my eyes had avoided them. But suddenly...someone had looked at me. Someone had noticed I was more than a bundle of rotting rags, and taken a moment to really look. But why?

Clutching my staff, I laboriously hauled myself to my numbed feet and stood leaning on the walking stick. Some folks in the rear of the crowd noticed the sudden movement, glanced briefly my way then quickened their steps. I didn't realize what I was doing until I found myself shuffling forward, after the crowd. Through the strips of aged garment, my desperate eyes swept over the sea of people, struggling past their nameless faces, searching, seeking the one who... I saw him. At the front of the clamoring crowd, he moved forward casually and with confidence. He didn't flinch when hands reached for him, whether young or old, healthy or sick, rich or poor. And suddenly I knew that I had to get to him. Though I wouldn't be allowed to touch him, somehow I knew that his word alone was all I needed. If he would just speak to me.

With renewed strength that seemed to come from nowhere, I shuffled alongside the crowd, down the edge of the dusty road. Whenever I stumbled too close, those near me would cringe and hurriedly drift deeper into the crowd around them, away from me. I didn't care. I had only one goal. And suddenly that goal seemed more important than anything else had ever been.

When I neared the front of the crowd, I lunged inward, my hand outstretched. "Master!" Those I bumped into gasped and cried out, shying away in horror. I ignored them, barely noticed them. "Master...please..." All at once, the crowd was no longer moving forward, but instead fanning out away from me as I stumbled through them.

Suddenly, a wall of men stepped between me and the one I was seeking. I hesitated, leaning shakily on my staff. The men rebuked me and ordered me away, but I couldn't move. I bowed my head down against the tip of the walking stick and wept. "Please...I must speak to the Master."

They held their ground as if nothing in heaven or earth could move them, but suddenly broke rank and stepped aside uncertainly when a gentle voice urged them to let me through.

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I shuffled forward, my eyes down and head bowed as the sudden urge to kneel swept through me like a whirlwind. I hesitated a few feet from him and clutched my stick, my diseased body hunched and trembling. As I felt his eyes upon me, I fell to my knees in a heap before him. Tears flowed like a river from eyes. And words that shocked and frightened me spilled off my dry lips. "Lord...if you will...you can make me clean."

In a movement I wasn't prepared for, he reached out his hand...and touched me.

Since the day I had walked away from my life five years ago, no one had touched me. Not a single touch. Now, suddenly, someone was laying a hand on my shoulder.

I almost cringed, almost begged him not to touch me lest he be inflicted. But I couldn't move. I could only marvel at the feel of another human being. But he was more than just another person. Oh, so much more.

His hand squeezed my shoulder gently, affectionately, as if we were old friends greeting one another. I raised my eyes and met his warm stare. His eyes glowed as a hint of a smile crinkled the corners. "I Will." His voice was soft, tender. "Be thou clean."

A sudden rush of warmth swept through me like a raging flood and I gasped, a consuming exhilaration empowering my limbs, standing me to my feet. I felt my disease flow away in the flood of warmth, leaving in its wake a strength I hadn't felt for such a very long time. My hands clenched the staff fiercely, feeling every lump and groove in the wood, then released suddenly, letting the stick thump to the dry earth. With trembling fingers I clawed at the strips of rotted garment that encompassed my face, tearing them away and watching them drop to the ground beside the staff. His hand was still on my shoulder as I revealed my face to a world I had hidden from for so many years. I was trembling, tugging the decayed cloth from my hands and then just staring in awe at the clear, healthy skin and straight fingers.

"Tell no one of this." The quiet commandment, like a whisper in my mind, drew my eyes to his. I could only stare at him, his wondrous gaze pouring through my soul, filling me with emotions I could never begin to describe.

Tell no one? But how could I not? How could I do anything but proclaim with a shout what had happened here?

"Go." He said softly, squeezing my shoulder. "Show yourself to the priests as Moses commanded." His eyes glowed...literally glowed. "But tell no one of this."

I swallowed tightly, and nodded. "Yes, Lord." But even as the words slid off my lips, I knew I could not keep quiet, I could not stop myself from telling others of God's amazing gift to me.

Staring into his eyes, I saw the sparkle of understanding. He knew, even as he gave the gentle commandment, that I would tell others, that I wouldn't be able to help myself. So why did he tell me not to? Why would he? His fingers tightened on my shoulder one last time before he drew his hand back. I wanted to clutch him, grasp his hands in mine, press his palms to my lips and let my tears tell him how deeply thankful I was. But I could merely stand motionless as he smiled and moved on.

And in that smile I knew that neither words nor tears were necessary for him to understand my gratitude. He could feel it, as surely as I could feel his love for me. Me...a man rejected the instant I became an ugly scar on the face of humanity. Rejected and forgotten by all, except this one man and...

Though everything inside of me urged me to follow after him as the others did, I hesitated. I had to force my legs not to run after him, to beg him to let me stay with him, but somehow I knew that his desire for me lay

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elsewhere. Breathing deep of the warm air, I let it out slow as I watched the crowd disappear down the dusty road. I turned and walked in the opposite direction, towards a life stolen from me long ago.

Big blue eyes full of wonder stared up at me from the other side of the gate. She didn't appear frightened of me, though I was a total stranger to her now. I fought the need to grab her and hold her so close to me.

"Anna." I said softly. Tears tightened my throat. My baby girl.

Suddenly, a young boy was standing behind her, his hands gripping her small shoulders protectively. He stared at me uncertainly, as if struggling to determine if I meant them harm. As we looked at each other, no words passing between us, his distrusting eyes flickered with a trace of recognition. He swallowed then licked his lips. "Do we know you?"

My chest tightened and I wanted to cry, but I fought for control. "You did...once." I whispered. "I was hoping...we could get to know each other again."

The boy shifted his feet and cocked his head slightly. "What's your name?"

I smiled. "Jacob. My name is Jacob."

The boy's eyes widened. "That's my name." Something shifted in his stare as sadness darkened his eyes. "My father's name was Jacob, too. But he went away when I was little. He got sick, and had to go away so we wouldn't get sick too."

Tears burned my eyes. The horror of that day rushed back in on me and my knees threatened to buckle. Anna simply stared up at me with her big blue eyes as young Jacob went on. "Mother still prays for a miracle. She misses him a lot." His voice grew small, tight with his own tears. And for a moment, I saw the small, frightened boy he was the day I went away. "I still hear her cry for him at night." He swallowed thickly and looked down as if embarrassed to add his own admission: "Sometimes I do too."

The tears slid down my flushed cheeks but I made no move to wipe them away. "Jacob..." I whispered.

"Jacob? Anna?" The female voice drew my eyes away from my small jewels. A sudden ache swelled my heart until I was certain it would burst. The woman moved towards us uncertainly. Her beautiful long hair flowed down her back, teased lightly by the faint breeze. "Jacob...who are you speaking to-"

Her question disintegrated in the warm air when her eyes locked with mine. A multitude of emotions clouded her gaze, ruled by disbelief. She froze, unable to speak as she looked at me, surely wondering if she were hallucinating.

I released a breath I hadn't known I was holding. "Rebecca..."

"Jacob...?" She whispered, unbelief trembling my name on her lips.

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"Mother." Young Jacob turned and looked at her, but she wasn't seeing him. Like a flood, her tears broke suddenly as her hands flew to her face and she sank to a heap on the ground, weeping.

I stepped through the gate, running my hand lovingly over the tops of my children's heads, and went to Rebecca. I lowered to my heels next to her and drew her into my arms and held her tight. So tight I was afraid I would hurt her, but I couldn't let go. "My sweet Rebecca." I sobbed against her hair.

I felt small arms encircle my neck and looked up to see Jacob's tear streaked face only inches from mine. He had recognized me all along, I knew this now. But fear of believing had held him back from admitting what his heart had told him was so.

"My son." I choked out, releasing one arm from my wife and hugging my boy close, burying my face in his neck and sobbing harder than I had since the day I left. I felt another set of eyes on me and raised my head. Little Anna still stood where she was, watching the three of us uncertainly. Though five years old now, I could still see in her the baby girl who had reached out to me so eagerly whenever she caught sight of me.

I stretched out my hand to her and smiled as fresh tears poured down my face. "Come here, baby girl." I urged softly. "Your father needs to feel you close to him."

As if suddenly understanding what she was seeing, Anna broke from her stand-still with a suddenness that startled me, and ran into my embrace. I hugged my loved ones to me and held them tight, convinced I could never take my arms from around them again.

And their touch...oh their touch was like a sweet dream come true. In all my life, for as long as I lived, I knew only one other touch could ever compare. A touch, I realized now, that hadn't been necessary. His word alone would have healed me.

Why, I wondered, did he go one step further...and touch me? But I already knew the answer as I closed my eyes, hugged my family close, and saw his smile once again.

Love was not content to just speak words.

Love must express itself.

Love must touch.

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