

RICARD'S TALES

By: B.C. Pope

Night settled around the old manor house pushing down upon the roof loosing creaks to ripple across each room. The sound gave the few residents the impression that the dwelling, like them, was ready to stretch its bones at rest. The clock stuck nine and the air got thin as one half of the world breathed deep with the setting of the sun while the other half gasped with the beauty of the rising dusk. Ricard looked out the window following the line of dimming light running up and down the street. The shadows jumped out from the faces of buildings catching an early hold before the night came to call its own.

“It was better at night,” Ricard told himself. The patrols only went out at night if the watching flyers caught movement. In the dark high above everything nothing moved more than it was supposed to. “They will not see us, they will pass us by and go on their way.”

The view from the top floor of the fourteen-story apartment house could be off putting to some, but for Ricard at this height he could see each end of the block. A vantage point like this was not worth giving up unless it was by necessity. His life, the life of his family was one of constant readiness and evasion even while sleeping. But on nights like this the world gave solace and peace rather than out them like riot. Ricard reached down for the canteen of water by his foot noticing how dry his mouth had become. The watch took precedent over all other needs and so he tended to forget himself as a person so that he could remember what was lurking behind the now present shadow. The cool water was metallic and stale when it was loosed from the canteen into his mouth. The round spigot rubbed against the shadow of hair that had grown on his face in the last few days. His hair rough and uneven pulled a tiny echo of sound off the metal

edge similar to an old fashion music box. Ricard swallowed his water and drank another for good measure. He rubbed his chin with the back of his hand and settled the canteen down beside him.

The air had chilled the canteen causing the metal part of the container not covered by the leather straps to sting at Ricard's fingertips. This lone bite was enough to rouse his mind back to the now, making his eyes focus back to the task at hand and away from the thoughts of music. Tonight there would be no sirens he resolved; tonight there would be only a bed, his family, and dreams of nights no longer in need of watching. Those dreams were the best; those dreams were the ones he wished he could record and share with his family. He would give them a happy memory and their smiles would ease his brow heavy with worry.

"One day old man, one day we will watch only the dying of the sun for enjoyment that after some darkness the light would once again be there," Ricard spoke softly to himself. A wiry smile hung like an old picture moved to often to ever sit right upon the wall. He gathered his senses about him again and tilted forward in his chair. His eyes never breaking from the horizon. For now there was only the watch, a place too real for smiles or dreams.

"PAPA?" echoed a tiny voice from the bedroom across the hall. Not shrill, like it was scared, or with whine as if requesting more food; it was just the tiny voice of a child looking for reply to her call.

"Coming, my Smallest," Ricard answered. He stood up from his stool and pointed his feet in the direction of the bedroom. Every step crept back at him. Too loud and too

much purpose behind them he thought, there needed to be more silence and less direction to his steps or the sound would carry too far to ears with questions. Ricard took a breath and stepped again, this time soft and silent.

“Papa!” the tiny voice exclaimed happily as Richard stepped into the doorway. “Come, please. Mama is out of stories for me to hear. She has said you will have one for me to listen.”

“Did she Smallest,” Ricard said, looking to his wife, finding her with a half grin tucked at the edge of her mouth. Sovia knew many stories ones that could fill a room with laughter and chase away the shadows, but her turn at watch was coming and she needed sleep to keep her eyes alert. “Go now my love, find a warm place to rest your head beside the cockles of my heart.” His smile was genuine matching perfectly with Sovia’s in return. Ricard lifted the stool beside his daughter’s bed moving closer so that he could muffle his voice and give his daughter the comfort she appeared to need.

“Now Smallest, what kind of story do you want: one of princesses with tall castles, one with dragons chasing knights across the battles field, or one of storms that shake the earth waking old stones to build a future?” Ricard asked.

His daughter’s face puzzled as she thought on her answer. Her nose twitching up and down, eyes rolling through her thoughts trying to find the right piece of imagination to fit her needs of stories. She crumpled her face in wrinkles staring hard and mad. She was thinking and as she dismissed ideas the color of her face became less dark. She was just at the edge of pink when her eyes cleared and her smile started to grow.

“Papa, do you know any stories that are not sad?” Ricard’s Smallest asked. “All of your tales make me sad because I do not know who to cheer for. All of the ladies cry at spiders spilling their curds. The monsters give good reason for their actions. While the heroes throw their hearts like fools into a love that will kill them. They all make me sad. Papa, please no more sad stories.”

Ricard could not deny the look upon her face full of wonder and age beyond her years. All little girls should be wary of spiders. Villains should have reason for their nefarious deeds, but not to his Smallest. The world needed to work simple like water in a drain flowing freely with purpose, leaving nothing behind.

“Fine my Smallest I shall give you a story without sadness. But for me you must close your eyes to see the pictures of my words; agreed?” Ricard asked.

“Yes Papa. I agree,” she said. The thin lids of her eyes fluttered close. Her tiny hands tucking the blanket under chin. An excited smile painted upon her face as her mind cleared its slate making ready for new pictures. Making ready her questions should Ricard not fulfill his bargain.

“Now my smallest of smallest, let us begin at the start; open your ears and listen to no more sad stories,” said Ricard. He cleared his throat and like his daughter cleared his mind. He rubbed his hands together faster and faster to gather heat. Every story he told needed a spark, and this was how Ricard would light his way.

Ricard began with; in a valley where two rivers merged coming down from the mountains there stood a grand forest. The forest cut the valley in two like a great parting sea. On either sides of the forest mirroring one another were twined villages. Each

village was built beside a road that ran parallel to the river. Small houses made from timber cut from the forest. The wood was cut and quartered into frames, roves, and doors. Even sanded and painted in the same fashions for both towns. Buildings filled with happy village people who kept up with the livers of every other member of the village just as much as they kept up their own. When one looked upon the valley it looked to be a wide gaping mouth cut into the earth. A mouth filled with neat rows of teeth on each side and a deep dark tongue licking at both rivers as they merged just beyond the villages.

The two towns looked in all respects to have been designed from one single sketch. The shingles upon the roves lined the same; the trim on the windows evenly spaced and painted the same color. Even the butcher shops and the bakeries sat opposite each other like reflections in a mirror. The people, though they lived in the same mode and model, could not have been more different.

One village founded by the great clans of the north dawned in furs and tough skinned from cold and snowy bloodlines. The other founded by those from the seas in the south with skin dark from long years in the sun and dried like leather from the sea salt. There was one thing that bound these people to the same post; a sad notch to say the least, but a notch cut with the same blade at the same height.

Both villages lacked the laughter and cries of wee ones. There were no students to teach in the schoolhouses; there were no lingering faces at the windows of the sweet shops; there were no games in the fields till dusk. No mothers calling from windows welcoming flushed bright-eyed faces to warm soup and hearty love-kneaded bread. Travelers who passed through the villages on their ways North or South would note the

strange lacking in the happiness of each village. But they paid no mind to it and passed along tales of their journeys through a valley blanketed in accepted sadness as if it was as common as the sunrise in the east.

“But Papa?” her tiny voice cried out.

“I know my Smallest, but the sadness here is meant to fill the village with understanding, not to draw tears from your eyes,” Ricard’s gentile voice answered lulling her eyes back to rest, her mind back to his painted pictures.

Though most travelers came through either town without notice some felt the cold hand of secrets upon their necks. They told tales of these villages in many taverns and knot-holed market stalls. They said the children would be born but then carried away by storks to richer families whom paid the devils of the earth to provide strong healthy children to old barren kings. Others spun tales of a piper and a fiddler who had struck a bard’s contract with each town, only to be cast out when their songs turned modest and demure glances into heated actions and passionately whispered words. These two men drew their instruments to play a curse upon each village causing every child, current and to be, to dance free of their parents arms down to the river to drown while singing the wonder of the cast out musicians.

Another hushed story spoken behind pulled curtains drew a picture of a striogi who dwelled in the great forest. These monsters had struck a deal with the villages to spare them horrors daily for a single gift to be given yearly. The villagers were to draw their children into pies made from straw and place them in a great oven in the heart of the

forest. The story's messengers would speak of hearing great cries from the forest as they watched the billowing black smoke rising into the sky.

Best of all were the stories of a house made from sweets hidden in the forest whose owner would draw the children from the village with the smells of sweet breads and licorice ropes. The children would come and feast upon her house only to become so laden with fat to flee from her gnarled clawed fingers. Snatch them up she would so that she could drain their blood to fuel the moon god's ritual. A ritual that would fill her body with youth and vigor for a full day so that she may sneak into the villages. The allure of this wench would snare wondering traveler in her youthful arms and lustful eyes. These men who knew neither her face nor why the smell of gingered bread lingered in each of her whispered words and hidden kisses would find themselves dead down river a few days later. The truth however was far too simple to be correct and far too mad to be spoken of in civilized company. The answer to the riddle of children was a meal made from penance seasoned with rage and carried an aroma of madness.

Before the valley was such, cut by rivers and forests, it once stood as the tallest of tallest mountains. The peak could not be seen from any known angle. Its base too far around for a single person to count in a lifetime. Like the valley, the mountain that once was carried an air of mystery for no known creature of the five lands had been able to climb more than ten feet up from its base. The slopes were too steep, the crags too narrow, the footholds no bigger than the eyelash of an aphid. The mountain cast a mighty shadow down upon the land, moving in time with the sun's long race across the sky. The shadow birthed fear in the hearts of the first men to settle at the mountain's base and gave a silent reprieve from the killing rays of the sun. For dark creatures still wandering the

earth since the time it had cooled sought out the solace of the mountain's shadow. The mountain was mighty and would have stood till the end of time, had not the great north wind carried a cleaver fox upon its gales.

The wind blew his sleek furred form to and fro leaving him stranded at the very top of the mountain's peak as punishment for his most recent of malfeasance. The fox, once his head cleared from his tumbles, looked down finding himself without hope of retreat from such a precarious perch. The fox circled the peak seeking shelter from the cold only to find a small cave blocked steadfast by a mound of snow and ice. The fox dug at the mound, trying as he could to gain entrance. His skill was great at digging but each paw full of snow only merited more snow falling to the fill any progress he made. The mound moved to stop every attempt showing life where there should have only been cold complacent being.

"Snow why do you not allow me passage," called the fox.

"Because you did not give cause for me to," answered the snow.

"Curious," thought the little fox as he looked closely at the cut of the mound. Here and there he found the slight cut of a nose, an arm, the wiggle of a finger, pieces of dark earth colored skin. "You are an ogre are you not, great snow?" asked the fox.

"I am creature of trick and jested spoils," returned the snow.

"Why do you block my path to shelter?" asked the fox.

"Because I was unaware that you needed any," said the mound.

Their conversation continued like this till the great mound brushed the lingering snow from its face showing a great maw of a mouth, the pointed crooked brim of a nose, and the dark empty pools, which should have contained eyes.

“Here, here,” thought the fox noting a weakness for exploit. “A fool that can not see is soon led astray.”

“No, little breather, my lack of eyes is only a cause for regret. No weaknesses I have about my person,” said the ogre, even though words had not been spilled from the fox’s mouth.

“Ah but you do my friend, like me you lack ability to leave this mountain top for you cannot see the slopes or crags in which you could use to climb,” said the fox.

“Again no, tiny breather, I am not without anything, for I gather from the wind my food, my drink, and all manner of information from every inch of the five low lands,” said the ogre.

The fox had mastered many games of chance and knew his skill here would be tested. The ogre would need of something eventually, but the time the fox would last in the snow would not match that price. The fox testing his luck, offered the skills of his eyes so that the ogre may climb down the mountain and expand his knowledge of the world. If in return, the ogre would carry the fox upon his back for the journey. The ogre pondered the offer, enticed by the thought of knowledge the lower winds carried through the five lands.

The ogre agreed to the terms, and began to gather his strength so that he could stand once again at his full height. It was then the fox sprung into action quickly dancing between the ogres' legs, gaining his entrance into the cave beyond. The blood that flowed in the ogre's legs had long been asleep which made it easy for the fox to slip around them. The ogre having not moved or stretched in many years was too rigid and stiff to catch the fox as he passed.

Safely inside the cave the fox snickered into this paw, "foolish ogre I now have your food and your treasure and you have nothing but the wind and cold."

Hearing this there sprung a boiling in ogre's blood. Heat once again raced through his body fueled by anger at the fox's trickery. His body now burning with rage started to melt the snow upon him. The ogre's body began bellowed in steam as frost melted from his form. The ogre's hands curling to fists as his arms rose slowing above his head. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, called the fists of the ogre upon the earth. The fox jumped at the sound not out of fright, but out of force as the ground beneath his feet dropped a full ten yards. Again the ogre rammed his fists on the mountain's top, each blow driving the mountain deeper into the earth.

"YOUR EYES, LITTLE BREATH, GIVE ME YOUR EYES OR BE BROKEN BY THE STONES OF THE SKY," said the ogre with a voice that turned the fox's blood cold. But still the fox did not move due to half fright and half contentment with his prize. The ogre's strength like his rage had no lacking of endurance. His fists drove the mountain further into the earth's crust, knocking it from the tip of the heavens like wax constructed wings too close to the sun.

For days the ogre drew down his hammer blows causing great alarm to those that dwelt at the mountain's base. The men that lived there took what they could from homes that now laid in ruin and wreckage. The dark creatures held a tight-circled embrace while their shadowed refuge grew ever smaller. Day after day the fox grew accustomed to the ogre's tirade, making him a warm hovel amongst the varied odds, ends, and stones in the back of the cave. There the fox fell to sleep timing the beat of his heart to the beats of the ogre's mighty fists.

When the fox woke again he was unsure if a day or week had past while he slept. For he rose to find the sun's brilliant rays streaming into the cave through new cracks in the ceiling. He rose and cocked his ear to the cave's entrance searching for the reparative sounds of blow after raging blow. The fox found only the wind calling back to his ear. There were no shouts, no calls of rage, no thrusts of fists, and most of all, no shrinking of height in the ground below his feet. The fox steadied his muscles ready to run should there be trouble. He moved to the cave entrance to view what had become of the ogre and the world in general.

The ground was no longer covered in snow or ice. It was now sodden like silt along a rivers edge from the melted water that now seeped through the soil. The sky was bright as it shone down upon a large mound sitting just outside the cave mouth. The fox listened knowing the mound for its true meaning finding it heaving its shoulders up and down with an intermittent sigh.

"I hear you breather, I know you are there. Have you come to laugh at what you have made of me," said horse sorrowful voice from the mound of ogre flesh.

“What have I done ogre, I have been asleep with no help from your ranting or you’re insistent pounding,” answered the fox quick to defend.

The ogre turned in a circle showing the face with no eyes now had arms with no hands as well. “This is your work breather, this is the merit of your trick’s toils,” said the ogre his voice full of lose and accusation.

“I see, or more to the point I lack in what is shown,” said the fox. “So now you lack eyes to see me and hands to catch me, there is a problem in this?” said the fox filled with morbid questioning.

“Yes, I have no eyes to see you, no hands to catch you, and no mountain to keep you,” the ogre answered.

The fox looked about from the cave’s mouth finding no high peak only a bowl of a valley deep cut valley. Awe filled the lungs of the fox as he scanned what had once been the greatest of mountains now a concave landscape with no more height than the small toe of a flea. The new mountains that now rung the outside of the valley could be heard laughing at their once mighty cousin. They loomed above him standing taller now that the he was defeated. The fox felt for a second the pang of guilt strum his heartstrings but he was resolved to be done with this encounter, so he stepped from the cave prepping himself for his flight.

“You are leaving then breather, no remorse for your folly I see,” came the sullen voice of the ogre now full of judgment and scorn.

“Perhaps this is what the fates viewed all along ogre, you and I are too small to know such things but for now I am off,” answered again the fox bracing his paws to run.

The ogre made no effort to stop the fox as he began to flee. The ogre reached out only with his ears to follow as the fox jumped rocks, cracks, and glory that once had been his mountain. There he sat for many ages while the land filled with the growth of trees and other green. Water poured in from the new cliff faces forming streams that grew to rivers. All the while the ogre sat and listened to the changes that growth and time brought to the valley. The ogre always listening, never moving, never speaking once again becoming a mound of dirt and dust.

A hundred and six score years passed before the noise of man entered the valley as settlers from the south and north found harbor along the banks of the twin rivers. Their hustle and bustle woke the ogre from his slumber reminding him of the tiny breather that had tricked him from the sky. The ogre's anger awoke along with his mind and the heat of it burned away the small brush that had grown about his person. As the ogre listened he heard the voices of big breathers as well as small ones each with their own tones and wishes, but between them all it was the tiny breathers that stuck out to him. Their whine and cries for help. Always asking never giving these tiny voices. The sounds fed his memories from the past and started his mind working at a plan.

In time the ogre called to these tiny breathers while they slept filing their ears with old songs, which no man had heard since the gods, themselves sung man into being. The songs filled the children's heads with thoughts of wondrous adventures filled with candied pies and treasures made from sweet cakes. The adults only heard the song as a

fearful reminder of their own mortality as if the hand of death was reaching out to them pulling their mortal coil close to cut away their being.

In the morning the adults awoke in cold sweat while their children awoke bright eyed and eager to set out on the dreamland adventures. The ogre listened from his forest hold noting the change in the voices around him. This would work he thought, he would call to the children of the villages to bring themselves before him so that they may act as retribution for the tricks the fox played on him so long ago.

During the deep slumber of night the ogre called out in old songs to the young breathers on the villages. He filled their dreaming minds like before with wishes and adventure but this time he also filled it with a command. They slowly came to him crawling from their beds and lofts out windows under latches trudging tiny feet stumbling along the river's edge deep into the forest. When they found the ogre sitting in the deep heart of the forest they awoke with fright so that their eyes were as open as they could be. The ogre then sucked in with his mighty lungs drawing their eyes into his great maw and swallowing each orb whole. The eyes protruded from this gut poking out from new eye sockets formed from his old hard skin. The children looked upon themselves standing confused and lost unable to make out any action to save themselves from this horrible dream.

The old song started again climbing up the ogre's throat to dig back into the minds of the children. It built a clouded of reality there in their simple innocent minds giving full command of their will to the ogre; their hands now where his, their feet stepped in tune to his thoughts, their eyes saw only what he uncovered for them. The

children now completely under his control were ordered to fill his belly with food and drink to build him a house from the wood and the green. To do his bidding for all time as punishment for the fox's past crimes.

In the morning the parents of the village awoke to find small empty beds and a lack of tiny shoes sitting by the hearth. Curious they all thought that they should wonder such things for they had no children. The old song was strong in the memory and minds of the villagers for it had wiped the understanding and love of children from their hearts completely. The old song stuck as it had so long ago when the gods preformed it to the dirt calling man from it. But now the same sang was used to take life from man, to wipe clean the memory of children, and to sing away all love. A fitting punishment thought the ogre, allowing for the first time in centuries a cracked wicked grin to have place upon his face.

And so it continued in the valley each child born would be called to the forest and their parent's memory altered so there would be no questions. This was the great truth of the valley; the lingered lover's kiss that burnt the minds of merchants and travelers as they passed through. When asked about children the reply was that none had ever been. When questioned the need for cribs or toys the answer was always that they were trinkets, objects made to be sold. Always an answer ready for such questions, always a response for conversations leading down those paths. There were no children here in the valley no little voices singing rhymes, no tiny feet racing after frogs, no small faces in need of washing brimming with smiles. It was an unknown sorrow that had been birthed here in the valley mothered by old songs and fathered by rage seeking reparations.