

World Tree (Flash x 4)

by Jo Thomas - Wednesday, August 09, 2017

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I

As Man got older and his children grew up and had their own, he grew to resent the gods and their rule over his life more and more.

“How is it that they are forever young while I age and fade away?” he asked. “How is this fair?”

The unfairness of it sat so bitterly in his stomach that he was unable to eat or sleep and it made him so disagreeable his children could take no more of him. They talked among themselves and they put forward the eldest son to calm their father down. The son prayed in the temple of the All-Father and then talked to Man.

“The gods remain forever young because they eat the fruit of a certain tree,” said the son. “Far to the west is a great tree of silver that bares apples of gold. The gods eat these apples and it lengthens their youth.”

“How do you know this?” asked Man.

His son replied, “The All-Father told me while I prayed. The All-Father told me that if you pray to him, you may have one of these apples. But it will only lengthen your life so much and you may not have more than one.”

But Man refused to pray. Instead, he took his leave and walked west.

“I will either find that tree and have my fill of apples or I will die trying,” he said. “But I will never bow my knee to the gods again.”

He travelled for many months but did not find a silver tree with fruit of gold before he saw the sun set in an ocean so wide he would never be able to cross it.

“Where is my tree?” he shouted but the sun did not answer.

Instead, it sank beneath the waves and the evening grew loud with the sounds of singing insects and another beautiful voice that Man could not identify. He followed the sound in the fading light, and then –

“My tree!” the Man cried.

He stared at silver branches so heavy with golden apples that they bent to touch the ground. He hurried forward and touched them, each of them, as if they were his.

The singing stopped.

“Little Man, those are not your apples,” said a young woman, a maid so beautiful that Man could not even look at her directly. “You will die anyway, but if you do what you are thinking of, you will upset the balance of the world, the gods will weaken and age, and you will die in a manner you will live long enough to regret.”

Man spat in her direction, plucked an apple from the tree and bit into it. Just the one bite was enough to make him feel as young and strong as he had been when his twin had still been alive. He looked again at the young woman and laughed.

“Little Man, do not,” she said. “I can tell you that I know everything that will ever be and this choice will do you no good.”

Man plucked as many apples as he could carry in his bag and grabbed the woman. She did not scream or fight but she looked at him with such disgust that he threw her over his shoulder so that he could not see her face.

Man and his captive travelled east for many months until he returned to the All-Father’s temple where he had left his family, gradually eating his way through all the apples he had gathered. But when Man came home, he did not recognise any of the people there – children, parents and grandparents going about their daily tasks.

“Where is my son?” Man asked. “Where is my family?”

The people turned to him and stared. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

The young woman said, “Whatever happens, do not put me down,” but Man ignored her words and dropped her at his feet.

“Who am I?” he asked as age crept back into his body. “Who am I? I built this town. I laid the stones of that temple. My brother’s bones lie beneath it all!”

“But that was generations ago,” said the people there.

And then he realised that age had claimed him once more and he was becoming little more than a skeleton than could barely stand. He stared at the young woman.

“I told you so,” she said as he crumbled into dust.

Then she turned and walked westward.

II

The Great Mother had an orchard of many precious trees, among them the large silver oak whose golden

acorns fed the pigs that she served her household. The orchard was tended by a woman the Mother herself had picked because she had a gift for knowing what was happening all about the world at any one time and was the most trustworthy of the divine.

Still, the Great Mother did not trust that no-one but she would claim the fruit and mast of this orchard. So, eventually, the Mother set one her sons, a many-headed serpent to watch over the orchard and the woman. But the blood of the First Waters ran in this serpent's veins and, while he could honestly claim that he never ate a single one of his mother's fruit or mast, he grew large and fat on her pigs while he abused the woman who tended the orchard.

The woman begged the Great Mother for help but the Mother would hear nothing against her son.

The woman begged the All-Father for help but the Father would not interfere in his wife's business.

The woman begged anyone among the divine who would listen and no-one answered – until the Striker, son of both the Mother and the Father, heard her.

“Go into your house and lock the door,” the Striker commanded.

A storm gathered over the orchard and the woman fled to the shelter of her little hut as the Striker swung his great club about the orchard. Every place that club struck, a lightning bolt was loosened from the storm clouds above and the serpent, too, fled. But he chose to hide beneath the oak, a tree that has always helped the Striker in his vengeance, and a great bolt struck both it and the serpent, setting light to one and destroying the other.

III

Before the Morning and Evening Stars were set in their place, they were great heroes who strode the earth slaying monsters. It was known that the Morning Star was the son of the All-Father but their mother never admitted who fathered the Evening Star. That his brother was mortal and fated to die where he was divine always bothered the Morning Star, although he did his best to hide it from his brother and their family. It bothered him enough that one day – still before they became the brightest stars in the sky – the Morning Star travelled to the mouth of the underworld to see the crone who waited there and knew everything that had ever been.

“Tell me, crone,” said not-yet-the-Morning-Star, “if you know as much as you claim, who is my brother's father?”

The crone shrugged. “One of your other brothers, no doubt. Or perhaps one of your mother's people.”

“If that is so, why is he mortal? The children of gods are all gods or demi-gods.”

The crone replied, “Are you sure that you really wish to know?”

“Yes,” said not-yet-the-Morning-Star.

“You see this tree I sit under,” said the crone, pointing up.

It was a great silver yew with berries of gold and its silver roots showed through the roof of the cave that was the path to the underworld.

“Yes,” said not-yet-the-Morning-Star.

“Eat of its fruit and hang yourself upside-down upon it for three days. If you live and do not know the answer to your own question by then, I will tell you,” said the crone.

So not-yet-the-Morning-Star did as he was instructed, eating the golden yew berries and tying himself to the trunk so that his feet were above his head. The first day passed uncomfortably, the second in screams. He lost his voice by the third morning and was barely conscious of the passage of time as he mouthed unknown words to himself. By the time the crone cut him down at the end of the day, he could not remember a time before his hanging and he was sure that he had only been taken down to walk through the cave into the underworld.

The crone laughed and stuck a spear through his foot that pinned him to the roots of the yew tree.

“Not yet, my lovely, if ever,” she told him.

The next morning, after he had slept and eaten, the crone asked, “What do you know?”

“Many things,” he replied.

“And do you know the answer to the question you asked?”

He considered for a while and replied, “Yes.”

The crone laughed again and unpinned his foot from the yew’s root.

“Does it make you any happier?” she asked.

He considered for a while longer. “It isn’t important enough to care about.”

III

There was a feast to be held among the gods and everyone was invited, save for the Weavers who tended the World Tree and did their best to hold it to health and order.

“We knew that this was coming,” said the Weaver who knew all that would ever be, “and what comes if we do this.”

“They must pay for the insult, even so,” said the Weaver who knew all that had ever been.

“Let it be so,” said the Weaver who knew everything that was.

So the Weavers plucked fruit from the tree’s silver branches, a great bunch of golden ash keys, that they turned into a great crown. They took this to the All-Father’s palace and threw it out into the hall so that it landed among the other gods.

“This belongs to the greatest of the goddesses, to mark her as the Queen of all of us” said the Weavers.

“Then it is mine,” said the Great-Mother, “for I am the Earth and the mother of all.”

“Not all,” said the Sun. “The crown is mine for I provide light and knowledge to the world.”

The Dawn laughed. “I am the one who provides hope and love. What person, god or mortal, can go without them? I am the greatest and should be queen.”

The All-Father stood, his feet touching the ground, and the air thickened with his anger and rage but the Weavers had left while the goddesses were grabbing for the crown.

“It is mine,” said the Great-Mother and the earth shook so that the mortal settlements upon it were torn apart.

“It is mine,” said the Sun and she refused to ride her chariot across the skies again until the matter was decided, leaving the mortals below in darkness.

“It is mine,” said the Dawn and the mortals grew terrified of all the things that might be in the dark and, as their anger rose, began to fight amongst themselves.

The All-Father picked the crown up and tore it apart. “It is no-one’s any more.”

The three goddesses turned on him and there was shouting, and fighting, and heartbreak in the mortal world as their divine powers broke the world apart.

Quietly, unseen, the abandoned footholder gathered the ash keys and put them back together as three smaller crowns. She followed the Weavers back to their place at the foot of the World Tree and held out the crowns.

“These are yours,” she said. “Even the gods must bow to fate.”

The Weavers each took one of the ash key crowns and smiled at her. The earth ceased shaking, and the Sun’s chariot resumed its journey, and mortals knew hope and love once more – if only because the gods had finally realised that the ash keys were no longer there to be fought over.

“We are sorry that we didn’t think to invite you,” the footholder said.

The Weavers held out another crown of golden ash keys. “And may Kindness be queen of all.”

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