



The Boy Called Him

1 In the old days, before maps and cars existed, there was a village nestled high amongst the mountains. It was known only by its location — Between Hills. Life in Between Hills transpired, as anyone would expect, with each member of the village having a certain skill that they brought to bear for the benefit of all. That is, except for the boy they called Him. Him was a foundling; a child left in the wilderness, swaddled in moss and suckling on skinless berries. Between Hills was home to a kind race of people, so even though they could not divine any purpose for the child, they took Him in as one of their own.

2 Many summers later, tragedy befell the village of Between Hills when a plague infested the mountains. Skin buckled and blistered, mouldering under the ravages of pus and pain, while eyes

milmed over with moist cataract webbing. Worst of all, joints hardened and scraped, cracking their ligaments into dry paper. The people of Between Hills could do nothing but weep over their dwindling population.

3 Soon after the first sores started to form, Him dreamt a most unusual vision. Night clutched the mountains, and he saw the streets filled with villagers, shuddering under the pains of their illness. Before Him's eyes, the moon broke forth from the clouds. Its rays bathed the diseased in a dazzling light, burning away their sickness.

By morning Him was certain as to what form his purpose in Between Hills would take. He would save his village with moonlight.

4 Without a word, Him stole away from the lands of his childhood, his mind set on reaching the Moon's domain — the sky. Soon his hands bled and blistered with the rough temper of rocks; Him had found the tallest mountain within sight and he had to climb it by nightfall. Luckily for Him, the summer days were longer than their nights, allowing his exertions the proper time to bring the boy to the mountain's summit.

5 At the peak of the tallest mountain in the land, in the early hours of summer night, the boy found himself standing less than a metre away from the most mobile twig he had ever seen. Two gnarled points twisted arthritically, extending themselves up towards the sky. But it was not a twig he watched dance in the moonlight. It was an old man whose dusty eyes gripped the moon in a desperate gaze. His toothless mouth was rounded with silent effort and those points, two hands as taut as his poor ankles, were straining for the heavens.

"Soon," the twig-man rasped, "all I need is to grow another inch."

6 Him knew in that moment that he would not find the moon's light up there. Turning away from the sad sight, he set about climbing back down the mountain. Being neither dimwitted nor quick to give in, the boy was already hatching another plan in his mind. The sky was the moon's domain, and therefore she would be at her most powerful in the heavens. Perhaps Him could reach her in another place where she would not be in her most supportive element.

7 Born inside the mountains, the river was a quarrelsome flow, fighting its way down through the rock and soil of the valley. This wild place, far from the serenity of the stars, was where the boy had come. The moon was nothing more than a visitor here, her glowing orb buffeted to an imperfect reflection upon the rushing water.

8 Summer air is warm, but the heart of mountains burns icily through all seasons. The river stung the boy's legs to numbness as he walked out towards the moon's reflection. He was almost upon it when he caught sight of raindrops plip-plopping in a ring around the silvery dish. The strange thing was that these raindrops fell upwards, from the river's depths. Him narrowed his eyes and saw that these were not raindrops, but the mouths of trout, their lips smacking ripples upon the river's flowing surface. As politely as he could, he asked the fish for some moonlight.

9 "No, we have too many mouths to feed," they replied, "but on nights such as these, when the moon is at her largest, she allows her only child to ride horses in a field nearby. Go and the moon's daughter and she will give you the moonlight."

10 The field that the fish spoke about lay in another valley, just below the village of Between Hills. In daylight it was a breathtaking sight, carpeted with orange and yellow flowers; night laced the field with an atmosphere that was pure magic. It was no surprise, Him thought, that the moon's daughter would choose such a place to ride her horse. The boy scanned the field, but he could find no real shapes amongst the shadows clamouring for his attention. There was nothing in the gloom — the cruel fish had lied.

11 He turned away, to return to Between Hills and watch the last of his adoptive people perish, and in that moment his eyes met the celestial silver of another's. Vertigo overtook the boy's senses, plunging his mind from the moon to the earth in an ongoing cycle of unusual emotions. Unable to decipher his own thoughts, the boy knew that forever more he was the property of the girl who stood before him.

"Why are you following me?" she asked.

12 Compelled in so slight a manner, the boy told the girl about a village between two hills, a plague that boiled skin, a man who would never reach the moon and fish greedy for light. The weight of these words released, he felt the long night burst from his eyes, his tears salting his face. Secretly, in the pit of his stomach, he begged that the girl would help him.

13 The moon is an old being, with stony bones and dusty flesh older than the first memories of our people. Decisions, from either herself or her only child, are made in phases, shifting through our skies and calendars. They are not made in the single beat of a moment. Yet something about the wildness in the boy's eyes and the rattling breath of his chest brought a sudden certainty into the moon daughter's heart.

14 Already the first light of a new day was creeping over the mountains. Ignoring Him, the girl turned to

face her mother, now little more than a watermark on the horizon. Exhaustion dropped the boy to the ground where he must have dozed off, because suddenly the boy felt his body jolt back into awareness. The girl, her mysteries performed, had kissed the poor adventurer on his forehead, placing a silver locket into his hand as she did so. Their eyes met again for another frozen millennium. When he finally did blink, thawed by the fiery pink of dawn, he found his vision empty. The moon's daughter had returned to her mother.

15 It is often said that the boy returned victorious to his village, using the silver locket to drive the plague from his neighbours' flesh. From that summer onwards, the people of Between Hills had a new name for the foundling. They called him Hero. And, though he would never see her again, he rode out on a horse one night of each month, his heart and mind afire with the memory of a girl whose eyes eclipsed the world.

Questions

- Why did the people of Between Hills take the boy in as one of their own?
 - They knew he had a purpose.
 - They were a kind race of people.
 - They needed his help.
- What was the moon's domain?
 - the mountains
 - the sky
 - the night
- The fish would not give the boy any moonlight because
 - it was only a reflection.
 - they could not see it.
 - they wanted it for themselves.

- What laced the field with an atmosphere of magic?
 - the night
 - the flowers
 - the girl
- The boy was bewitched by the girl's
 - face.
 - eyes.
 - moonlight.
- How do the villagers know that the moon's daughter must have existed?
 - The boy cured the plague using her locket.
 - The boy was in love with her, even though he never saw her again.
 - The trout in the angry river knew of her existence.

Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section shown in brackets.

- Occurred or happened (1)
- A province or realm (6)
- To be knocked about or into something (7)
- To work out the meaning of something (11)
- An abandoned baby (15)

Grammar

Find the **noun** described by the adjective in these sentences.

- Many summers later, tragedy befell the village.
- He found her in the night-laced field.
- The moon is a being with stony bones.
- The boy's emotions plunged in an ongoing cycle of confusion.

Back To The Text...

- The fish were completely unhelpful.
 - true
 - false
- The moon and her daughter didn't normally make quick decisions.
 - true
 - false
- Him was desperate to see the girl again.
 - true
 - false

Sequencing

Look back through the card to find what happened first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- Him had a vision.
 - Him realised his purpose.
- Him spoke to the fish.
 - Him saw that the twig was a man.
- Him's mind cycled through unusual emotions.
 - Him told the girl his story.

Think About This

- The word *perish* in section 11 means
 - organise.
 - challenge.
 - concentrate.
 - die.
- Which words in section 14 tell us that the moon was fading?
 - "the first light of a new day was creeping"
 - "little more than a watermark on the horizon"
 - "for another frozen millennium"

Challenge Option

Drawing: Sketch Him talking to the fish in the river.

