The Village of Abernathy

Geneve lived in the village of Abernathy which sat quietly in the grassy valley of Porth next to the gently flowing river Sieve. Abernathy was the type of village that never seemed to change, for the villagers preferred it this way. They would say, "We have 58 people in this village, and we wish for no more and no less." They lived peacefully among each other, always willing to lend a helping hand, and if asked, not a single soul would complain about their life in Abernathy.

Each day began and ended the same way in Abernathy. The people would rise with the sun and begin their morning chores. The farmers would feed the animals and pick berries for breakfast while the fisherman would pull nets they had set overnight and repair any damage done to them, and the children would clean their huts and prepare breakfast.

In the afternoon, the farmers would toil in their fields, the fisherman would set their nets in the river, and the children would play among the river rocks with the reminder, "Don't stray from the village now children. Always stay within the limits of Abernathy." Soon the bright sun, for it was always sunny, would begin to sink behind Porth hill west. This signaled dinner time, and the farmers, fisherman, and children would gather at the one tavern in the village.

Each villager would greet old man Charles, the owner of the tavern, with a warm smile before entering. For they knew Charles had once again prepared a feast of steaks, potatoes, bread, and mead for them to gorge upon.

Upon finishing their feast, the village would combine their voices to sing "Farwell," their favorite song. It was a slow melodic tune giving thanks to God for the blessings of the day before surrendering to the fact that tomorrow was upon them.

With the trill of "Farwell" hanging in the air, the villagers would head to their separate huts. The mothers would tuck their children in and whisper, "Sleep tight, and may tomorrow bring you as much joy as today."

For as long as Geneve could remember, her everyday began and ended this same way. She could not complain, but being the curious child she was, she often wondered if there was more to life. She would ask herself, "What is beyond the Abernathy? What lies outside the valley of Porth? Where does the river Sieve lead? Why does no one visit our village? Why does no one leave our village?"

Occasionally she would work up the courage to ask her parents, both farmers with sunset orange hair and slightly hunched backs from plowing, "What lies beyond Abernathy?"

And she always received the same response, "What lies beyond Abernathy does not matter. Are you not happy here Geneve? Are you not safe here Geneve?"

Despite knowing the answer before hearing it, Geneve could not help feeling disappointed. She thought if she could only concentrate intensely enough, that the answer would change, that her

deepest question would be answered. But just as one cannot prevent the sun from rising or the crops from going bad, Geneve could not change the answer to her question.

She simply decided that she would have to look elsewhere for her answers. She debated venturing out of Abernathy following along the river Sieve, but she decided it was too dangerous to do alone. And what good were answers if she ended up dead?

So as weeks passed, Geneve's curiosity continued to grow, yet she was no closer to finding her answers. She spent every waking moment thinking off how to find her answers. Her mother and father had begun to worry about her. "Geneve are you not happy?" her mother asked one day. "I see you have not swept the floor today, and you forgot to finish your breakfast."

"Sorry mother, I will do both at once," said Geneve quickly sweeping the floor while popping bites of berries, bread, and eggs in her mouth between broom strokes.

Silently she thought, "What does it matter if I sweep the dirt floor, mother? It is already dirty. And what does it matter if I finish my breakfast, mother? There will be more of the same to eat tomorrow." Geneve began to consider herself, unhappy, if that was possible. She didn't think it was possible to be unhappy in Abernathy; she wasn't even sure it was possible to be unhappy. But the only way to describe how she felt, was unhappy, the opposite of what everyone else always felt in Abernathy.

So she sat one afternoon, the sun burning brightly high above her, thinking, "I am unhappy, and I will never find my answers." When it hit her, not the way to find her answers or happiness, but a stone thrown by a skinny fisherman's boy with greasy black hair and waterlogged skin.

"If she's not careful, she'll end up like Scourage," she overheard the boy saying to the other children. "I heard he used to act like this. Unsatisfied with this village, unable to find joy. That's why he did what he did."

"I hear he was ugly," said a young girl with golden curls and a haughty smile.

"Yes, he was very ugly indeed," said the fisherman's boy suddenly drawing the attention of all the children. They surrounded him, gazing longingly at him, like he held something they had never experienced in their lives before.

He seemed to relish in the attention turning slowly to ensure everyone was intently listening to him. "Ugly! From the way my parents describe him, ugly barely does him justice. They say he has pale yellow eyes, like that of a snake, set into his hollow face. His hair is a scraggly mess of grey that hangs to his shoulders, and his wrinkly skin is tinged grey. And worst of all, they say he used to steal travelers' souls attempting to find happiness. That's why no one visits here anymore. Scared of having their souls taken."

Suddenly intrigued, Geneve leapt off the large flat stone she had been sitting upon and pushed her way to the center of the circle. With curiosity and intrigue gripping her, she asked, "And why does he not steal our souls?" Not a question she had been thinking about forever, but a new

one spurred by a sudden wealth of information that she had just been blessed with. For in all the years that she had lived in Abernathy, no one ever discussed Scourage. He was merely a broken plow, lost and forgotten behind overgrown weeds.

"Silly girl," said the fisherman's boy with a chuckle. "Haven't you heard that he can only steal the soul of someone who enters or leaves our village? The soul of a traveler."

"I hadn't heard that," said a small boy with straw hair timidly.

"Of course, you haven't," said the fisherman's boy rolling his dark eyes. "Because I just told you. I just told all of you."

"But you –" began the small boy before being interrupted by the fisherman's boy. "And that's why we are only allowed to walk from our homes to here to Charles's tavern and back home. Surely you all wondered why our parents insist daily, stay within the limits of Abernathy."

Stunned, that was what Geneve felt now. For all her curiosity and questions of what lie beyond Abernathy, she had never once wondered why her parents were adamant to keep her within the village limits. She merely atoned it to the fact that everyone was happy in Abernathy, so why leave? She never imagined that they were trapped, unable to leave without losing their souls.

"Finally dawning on you fools, huh," said the fisherman's boy seeing the same look on everyone's face. The look of astonishment followed by the realization that they were, "Trapped! That's what we are."

"But it doesn't matter, right?" asked the small boy looking worried.

"Right, it doesn't," said the fisherman's boy staring at Geneve who was lost deep in thought. "If you're happy that is. If you have no plans of leaving Abernathy that is." The fisherman's boy was now inches from Geneve when he asked, "So, are you happy? Do you plan on leaving?"

But Geneve hadn't heard the boy, her mind was racing faster than it ever had before. The wheels were turning faster and faster trying to process the information she had just heard. She didn't even notice the fisherman's boy inches from her face or the group of children surrounding her, eagerly awaiting her answer.

Finally, the wheels locked in place, and Geneve said, "I'll visit him!" An audible gasp could be heard from the other children causing Geneve to snap back to reality. "OH!" gasped Geneve herself finding she had been surrounded.

"Visit who?" sneered the fisherman's boy. But it was of no use, Geneve had turned and pushed her way out of the circle of children. They watched confused as she merrily skipped away, her sunset orange curls bouncing happily.

She wasn't allowed to be wandering the village during mid-afternoon, but she saw no one to stop her. The fisherman were busy setting nets in the river, the farmers were busy in their fields, and Charles was busy preparing the evening feast.

Geneve thought it felt oddly freeing walking down the deserted stone street. She wondered if the other children had recommenced talking about Scourage or pelting each other with stones as was usual. She concluded that it didn't matter, for she was free to go wherever she pleased, and her first stop would be Scourage's home.

While any other villager would be too concerned about losing their soul to visit Scourage, Geneve had no such concern. For she didn't entirely believe that Scourage could steal souls, and she would only be visiting, not leaving town as a traveler would.

Geneve passed quickly and silently through the village arriving at the overgrown path to Scourage's home where she paused. There was something foreboding and intimidating about leaving Abernathy, like she would never be allowed back. Geneve thought about this for a moment before deciding, "Maybe I don't want to go back? It's not like I could be happy again. Not after feeling so free."

The path to Scourage's was short, yet winded wildly through the tall grass still wet with dew from the morning. By the time Geneve reached Scourage's dilapidated shack, she felt she had entered an entirely new world. The sun had been hidden behind thick dark clouds, and there was a chill in the air that was never present in Abernathy.

"Maybe he does steal souls," thought Geneve suddenly wanting to turn around, but before she could a low grumble came from within the shack, "Come in, I've been waiting."

Geneve crouched to enter though the sunken door entering the smallest room she had ever seen. There was barely room for her to stand slouched inches from Scourage sitting, ugly as described, in a golden chair with mauve velvet cushions. A chair Geneve felt was oddly familiar, as were the multitude of objects surrounding Scourage, from lockets to watches to shoes. She felt she had seen them all before, she just wasn't sure where.

"You've been waiting for m m m me?" stumbled Geneve suddenly frightened. What if the objects surrounding her had once belong to travelers who had had their souls stolen?

"Yes. It took you longer than expected though," said Scourage his mouth squirming like a wounded caterpillar while the rest of his body remained stiller than a statue.

"What do you mean?" asked Geneve beginning to feel worse about her decision to visit Scourage every second.

"You see," began Scourage. "My name is Abernathy Porth Sieve. You and your people have lived happily in my village for a very long time." Geneve swallowed hard trying to hide her fear for she was finally having her questions answered without even asking them. "Well, to be more

accurate, all except you have lived happily. You, the girl who wants to know what lies beyond Abernathy, beyond the valley of Porth, beyond the river Sieve.”

Scourage paused for a moment, and Geneve thought she felt her soul being pulled from her chest like the warmth of a soup being pulled from your stomach by gut wrenching nausea. But then, her body settled back into a stupor of intense focus as words began to slide from Scourage’s mouth once again.

“But you should know, nothing lies beyond Abernathy or Porth or Sieve for you anymore. It may have once, but no longer.” As Scourage paused, Geneve once again felt her soul being pulled from her chest.

“I can see you don’t believe me. I can see you still want to leave,” continued Scourage, still as ever, like the words were being spoken by someone else and his body was merely the vessel. “That is what you feel. The cost of leaving. For you have lived many centuries, and to leave, means certain death.”

“No, you are trying to steal my soul!” shouted Geneve feeling the tugging becoming more intense.

“I do not steal souls. I merely grant wishes at the expense of my health. For many years, travelers visited Abernathy and I granted them wealth, love, whatever their hearts desired, all at the expense of my health. It wasn’t fun, but I enjoyed bringing joy to the world despite the look of pain and unhappiness it set upon my face. Then your people, the people of my village, thought why should travelers be the only ones who are granted wishes? So, they asked me if I could grant them one wish. I told them, “I will grant one of you one wish and that’s all.” The next day Charles visited my hut to make their wish. He asked, “There are 58 people in this village, and we wish for no more and no less. Can you make that happen?” I told him I could, but I would require a token from each villager. For you see, to give my health to complete one’s wish, I must have a conduit to them, a token dear to their heart, so I may always be attached to them. So the next day, they each brought me a token. Yours I believe, is this chair, which I thank you dearly for. And with that, the village of Abernathy contained 58 people never to have more or less, never to change, never to age.”

“But, why? Why would they ask for this?” asked Geneve through the tears streaking her face. It was all so outrageous, yet it all made perfect sense. Why every day was the same. Why no one ever visited or left. Why everyone was so happy. Because they had asked for it to be this way, but she hadn’t. She hadn’t asked to live everyday the same, to never age, to never leave.

“I believe they were happy the way they were, and they wanted it to be that way until they died,” answered Scourage unmoved.

"But they won't die! They can't die! Why did you make it that way?" sobbed Geneve frustrated. Frustrated that all her answers only lead to more questions to more unhappiness to more tugging in her chest.

"It was neither my fault nor theirs. They asked for no more and no less than 58 people. A visitor or a death or someone leaving would mean less than 58 people, so I had to make time stand still to complete the wish," said Scourage his yellow snake eyes quivering slightly.

"But what if I leave? What will happen to me? To the village?" wailed Geneve, the tugging in her test becoming unbearable.

"If you leave, time will catch up with the village and nothing will remain," said Scourage his yellow snake eyes surrendering a single tear. "You have asked me this same question many times before. That's how I knew you would come again. And each time, you have chosen the village, your people, my people over yourself. I reset the wish and you forget all of this until your curiosity, your unhappiness brings you back again."

The tugging in her chest was so intense Geneve could feel herself leaving Abernathy, destroying Abernathy. There was nothing beyond Abernathy, beyond Porth, beyond Sieve for her, yet it was time to go. It was time someone left Abernathy; they had lived for too long. It was time for it to end.

Geneve now resolute in her decision looked at Scourage, tears streaming from his yellow snake eyes. She had a feeling that he wanted this just as badly as her. That he did enjoy helping people, even at the expense of his own health, yet he had become unhappy like her. Perhaps more than unhappy, miserable, for one isn't supposed to live forever. Especially not in one place, in one way.

So with one last tug, the wish that held the people of Abernathy in and others out was lifted. For a moment, two weary travelers walking the ridge of the Porth valley caught a glimpse of a village bathed in sun, of farmers in their fields, of fisherman casting nets, of children playing then it was gone. In its place, the village of Abernathy overgrown with time and forgotten like a broken plow.

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