

The Thundering Footsteps of Destiny

A disappointingly short story by Patrick Wolfert

A cold shiver took control of his body once again as the rain continued to beat against his defenseless body. The young man ran his hands through his drenched hair and tousled it to expel some of the excess liquid that was draining his body heat so rapidly. His footsteps were audible even amidst the thundering sound of raindrops hitting the earth, for the water flowing directly off his saturated clothing into his shoes caused his strides to produce a squishing sound, which also corresponded to a rather unpleasant feeling.

He stopped for a moment and brought his hand up to shield his eyes from the torrent as he surveyed the horizon. The sky was dark though it was midday as far as he knew. In the distance ahead of him, he could see the grey silhouette of a forest, and a satisfied grin could be seen on his face until he removed his hand and continued his march. Though his limbs were cold and his heart was weary, the young man had a renewed energy; this new goal was attainable, and what had been a slow trudge now turned into a fast walk until he reached the edge of the wood.

As he stepped into this damp sanctuary, he gazed up into the green canopy. There were still drops of water falling on him, but the frequency was drastically lessened compared to what it had been outside. Breathing deeply the scented air of the forest, he smiled at the huge, ancient trees and nodded his thanks for their generous hospitality. The trees did not respond and tried to appear disinterested toward their guest, whom they had not in fact invited. They were themselves weary of the downpour but met it with a resoluteness and coolness that would not tarnish their dignity. Taking advantage of the semi-dryness the forest afforded him, the young man wrung out his clothing and tried to dry his hair as best he could. Sadly, there was little he could do about his footwear.

After he had lost a substantial amount of water mass, he continued on his path through the forest. He walked at a comfortable pace through this high-vaulted, green cathedral until he came to a small streambed. Here the path had a very steep incline, and, as it was quite muddy, he was inclined to carefully creep down sideways. With the help of trees and plants for stabilization, he made it safely to the stream. It was not

narrow enough to safely jump over, so he walked through it, for his shoes were already wet. He winced, however, as he found the stream water much colder.

When he had made it across, he was faced with the opposing side of the small gully. This slope too was quite slippery, made of the same clayey substance as the other side, and would make for a treacherous ascent indeed, but it was a short distance, and the young man was sure he could use his speed to get to the top before the soil had time to erode out from under him. Preparing to put this plan into action, he stepped backwards a few paces in anticipation of getting a running start. The young man then charged forward and leapt, his right foot landing about two-thirds up the height of the embankment, but the centimeter-thick layer of mud coating the surface of the slope would not support his weight, and before his other foot even touched down, his right foot slid down a half-meter, the rest of his body following until he was back at stream-level, lying on his stomach. He lay there for a moment, soaking it all in. He took a deep breath, pulling in the dull smell of clay and decaying plant matter, and let out a sigh.

When he had had his fill of self-pity and mud, he rose and tried to scrape the bulk of the sludge off his front side, rinsing his hands in the stream afterwards. The young man, determined to not be led into folly again by his impatience, now sought for a more suitable place to climb.

A little downstream he found a spot with plenty of plant growth to keep the soil in place and hopefully make it firm enough to support his weight. Utilizing tree roots and rocks for foot and hand placement, he cautiously scaled the slope. When he reached the top of the embankment, he could see the end of the wood. About a quarter of a kilometer ahead, there was a color change—from a brown and green to a dark grey, which he knew to be the hilly grassland that mostly defined this region. Even in the summertime, the plains were an eerie, solitary place, though currently the solitude was replaced by an angry presence: the rain and the black, bellowing clouds that completely blanketed the skies and caused the grey grass below to forget the sun ever existed.

As he walked the winding path through the grey sea, he felt anything but lonely. He found camaraderie in the countless multitude of grass shoots that danced together in the wind through the valleys and hills like waves in an ocean. All in unison, the whispering waves of grass told the young man to quiet his soul. “Shhhhhhhh,” they said in gentle chorus, “Shhhhhhhh. The grey canvas above unites us under one roof; it is our home now. Rest, and drink the refreshing water that falls from the heavens.”

But the young man could not stay with them. “I must move on,” he cried aloud. “I cannot stay.” And the rain carried a tear down his cheek. He moved on through the rolling sea that was naively unaware of the menacing nature of the storm, and he wished he could share in their bliss.

Along with the rain, the wind suddenly brought the scent of distant livestock—wet livestock. From this he judged he was getting fairly close to a village, and the little flame of hope in his weary but determined heart was set ablaze with renewed vigor. He quickened his pace though the rain smote his face the harder for it, trying to subdue him with all its might. He raised his head in defiance and marched along. Rounding a small grassy knoll, the village came within view. It was a quaint village typical of that land, of average size and personality, which was small and fairly quiet—the quietness made more so by the relentless storm that had been present these past few days. The few townsfolk who were out stared at the lone, drenched man as he passed them in the street.

At the end of the street, he stopped. He looked up at the stalwart building that stood before him. The doors opened, and soft music spilled out of the building. The music was wordless and without an agenda; there were neither rises nor falls in tempo or mood, neither crescendos nor decrescendos, just a pleasant, steady procession of arbitrary notes.

He walked on, leaving muddy tracks on the tile floor. White light overhead revealed colors in the room below that welcomingly contrasted with the dull palette to which he had grown accustomed. He stopped again and stretched out his arms. His hands clasped the object of his desire and drew it to himself. And after having obtained one liter of milk, he checked it off his mental list and proceeded to go after the other items: a block of cheese, canned tomato soup, saltine crackers, carrots, a head of lettuce, and a loaf of bread. All these things he took into his possession before proceeding to the checkout. After having taken care of pecuniary responsibilities, he left, stepping back into the rain, and returned the way he came.