

The Fireplace at the End of the World

The boy sat with his back to the hearth, the warmth of the stones making up for the discomfort of their hardness against his spine. He was looking at a page in the book he held, illuminated by the dim light of the fire behind him. He spoke.

"Bah."

His father looked over at him, holding the semi-frozen block of peat he'd been ready to cast onto the coals in the fireplace. He was stooped over, and his face was stubbled and pale in the orange light.

"Yes?"

The front room that had become their whole world except for short forays out into the frozen outside for more peat smelled of smoke and themselves. Wind rattled the shuttered windows, and they could both hear the ice cracking in the bay nearby.

"Why is the baby lit up in this picture?"

He held up Mah's holy book so that his father could see it. It was one of the few illustrations in it, and it fascinated him. The animals, the people leaning over the baby, and the light cast from somewhere above made it seem important. It was as if this was the best baby in the world, even though it was asleep in a place that even he knew babies shouldn't be.

His father completed his fireside transaction, and the peat began to sizzle as the coals dried it out in anticipation of consuming it. He sat back down in his old chair, and put his feet up on the hearth-stones.

"His name was Jesus, and he was supposed to save us. That's God's spotlight, I guess."

"What's a spotlight?"

His father sighed, and he sounded tired. He rubbed his chest, frowning. He answered, though, gesturing toward the book with his other hand.

"It's that. Light on something important."

The boy considered for a while before speaking again.

"How can a baby save anybody, Bah?"

He watched several expressions flit across his father's face. He didn't recognize all of them but he did see annoyance briefly. He thought to let it go, but Bah did answer him without too much time passing. He was surprised at how much he had to say.

"You were a baby, once, right?"

He nodded. His father continued.

"You've grown up some. He did, too. All the way. Then he did some wonderful things, and a lot of people were amazed. But a lot of other people didn't like that he did those things, and they killed him, and he let them do it. Then, after three days, he came alive again. That's how the story goes, anyway.

Your Mah would say that he did all that so we could ask to go with him, and he'd take us."

He looked at his father. He didn't entirely understand, but he knew asking about Mah was risky. He knew that she was not just an empty place for *him* in his heart. Bah felt it worse than he did.

"Go where?"

His father waved vaguely at the doorway.

"To a place that's not...what's out there. It's where your Mah said she was going, remember?"

He did, he thought. Kind of. He didn't like to think about when Mah died, and neither did Bah, so the question surprised him. He nodded again, and said the name.

"Hemin."

"Heaven." His father corrected him, but it seemed like he was thinking about something else. He rubbed his chest again and made a face, like he didn't feel good.

Then, the steady moan of the wind outside started to rise, and soon it was a shriek. The sound of ice crystals hitting the outside of their little house reminded him of watching Bah sand a piece of wood furniture. It had been long ago, he thought, when they still saw the sun during the day once in a while, but it was the sound he remembered. Mah had still been with them then, and that made his heart hurt.

Then, one of the shutters over the front windows popped loose, and began to bang against the side of the house. The bits of ice against the glass were much louder, and he could immediately feel cold air pushing its way into the room around the window frame. Bah cursed as he got to his feet, swaying slightly before making his way to the coat-rack.

"Dammit."

He shrugged into his under-coat, then his heavy over-coat. He stepped his already-booted feet into his wellies, and then headed for the door. He paused before opening it, and looked back at the boy.

"I'll be right back. Stay put."

The boy nodded, but there was something in his father's face that made him afraid. He didn't know what it was, but it was like watching the ice grow day-after-day when he was younger, until it had become the only thing outside now.

Except this was all at once.

His father started to turn away, but hesitated once more, his hand on the door-knob. He looked at the boy again, and the boy looked back.

Bah said,

"It'll be ok."

The boy saw the lie for the first time in his life, and he felt things shift inside. He realized that the promise was not something his father could give to him, and his despair was like the ice outside, waiting to get in. He saw that the fire really was his father, but that it wouldn't burn forever. Nothing here would. The boy began to understand, though he didn't want to.

He tried not to cry.

Then Bah forced his way out the door, the wind driving ice and cold into the room before he could drag the door closed behind him.

After that, it was just sounds outside.

Within a few seconds, the open shutter slapped shut, and the boy could hear the tiny screech of the clasp making its way home. The fire behind him stopped wavering, and heat pushed out into the front room again.

There was only the wind for a moment.

And then there was a muffled thump. Time ticked outward, but Bah did not return.

The boy got up. He was unwilling to wait. He no longer cared what Bah had said. He needed to know.

He put on his own outside gear, and followed his father out into the whirlwind.

The light outside was twilight shot through with skirled ice, but it was enough to show him his father lying on the porch below the window he had so recently secured. He was dusted in a coating of white, like a shroud.

The boy went to him, intent on helping him to his feet and escorting him back inside. But when he knelt beside him, he could see that Bah was barely there. His father did recognize him, though, and issued a command, even as he faded away.

"Get...inside."

It was in that moment that he really understood. *All the way*, as his father had said. His tears froze on his cheeks even as he looked down at the last glimmer of life in his father's eyes. He knew he had a choice to make.

As Bah passed to wherever he would go beyond this frozen end, or went nowhere at all, the boy thought about the baby in the illustration in Mah's holy book, and another echo of what Bah had told him.

To a place that's not...what's out there.

He stared out at the cold violence hurling itself at him, and felt his skin pass from pain to numb. He knew it was either time to give up, or time to go back inside. He was alone, now, with no one to save him.

How can a baby save anybody, Bah?

He stood up.

Out here, there was only ice. But inside, Mah's holy book, his father's old chair, and the fireplace waited.