

Old Man Earthquake

Nestled against the foothills lived a small family. The oldest child was a girl who, from the time she learned how to run, loved to explore the hills around her home. She spent her days among the long dry grasses of the hills, and she knew every roll and dip. She spent long days in the wild of the hills, not returning home until her mother called her for dinner.

She had brothers and sisters, but none of them loved, so much as she did, the hills around them. They would come out and play with her sometimes, but often grew weary of the outdoors so left the girl to play by herself.

She loved to while away hot afternoons underneath a great oak tree that stood at the top of the hill directly above her house. The girl's mother liked for her to play there for she could easily see her and could easily call to her from the house. The girl played house under the tree, or would climb its sturdy limbs and pretend to be a monkey. Sometimes she would just sit on one of the trees great roots and look at the mountain ridge nearby which had the shape of a face. The face was sideways and appeared to be sleeping. The girl wondered what would happen if the face woke up.

One late afternoon while she sat considering the face and weaving long grass stems into a crown, an old man appeared on the other side of the tree.

"Hello there," he said quietly to the girl.

The girl had never seen strangers before up on her hills, so she eyed him curiously. "Hello."

"Do you see the face too?" The old man enquired.

The girl was shocked. She thought she was the only one who could see it. Once she had shown it to her mother and father, but they had both thought she was seeing things that weren't there. She nodded at the old man.

"Its been there a long time. Maybe even since I was a boy and that was hundreds of years ago," he said with a laugh. The girl laughed too, for the man was very old. "My name is Mr. Shaker," he told the girl. "What's your name?"

"My name is May," she answered. She liked the old man instinctively. He was kind and gentle and had a warm smile. He took a seat next to her on the root. "Do you live nearby?" she asked.

"That I do May. I live just over yonder in the valley." He told her. "Now and then I like to walk up into the hills and see how the old girl on the ridge is sleeping."

"How do you know it's a girl?" May asked.

“I’ve been watching her these many years now and I just know.” He looked down at May and gave her a wink. “I think she’s catching up on her beauty sleep.” May smiled at him. “What are you making there,” he asked her.

“I’m making a grass crown, but I can’t get the ends to wrap right,” she answered.

“Well, let me see what I can do to help.” They talked for a long time and made a grass crown for each to wear. When May heard her mother calling for her and she ran down the hill for home, calling out goodbye to Mr. Shaker.

May often saw Mr. Shaker underneath the great oak tree. He would come and they would talk and he would play with her—playing house and jungle gym. May began to think of him as her best friend. At Christmas she made cookies especially for him and met him at the tree. In the Spring they made necklaces of poppies and in the fall they carefully planted the oak’s cornicopia of acorns.

When May spoke to her family of Mr. Shaker they smiled at her kindly. She knew that they thought she was making him up, that he was just an imaginary friend. It bothered her at first that they thought she was lying, but as time wore on she knew that it didn’t matter if they believed or not, for Mr. Shaker was her dearest friend and nothing would change that.

One afternoon, while playing jungle gym on the oaks broad, flat branches with Mr. Shaker watching, May fell from the tree land hard among the roots. Mr. Shaker ran to her, but she was unconscious, her head laying heavily along one exposed root.

Mr. Shaker stood above her anguished with her pain. He cried out. From deep in the earth came a corresponding rumble. Had May been awake to feel it, she would have thought she felt a freight train running under ground.

May’s mother, felt the earthquake and looked outside to find her daughter. When she didn’t see her she went outside to call. When May didn’t answer, the mother ran up the hill to the great oak tree and found May unconscious, swaddled by tree roots.

The mother gingerly picked up her daughter and rushed down the hill and quickly got her to a doctor. May had broken her arm and knocked up her head, but she made her recovery. Her family blamed her fall on the earthquake, but May had no memory of it.

Her recovery was long and she was bored. Every afternoon she watched the top of the hill looking for Mr. Shaker, longing to be up there herself. At last she was healed and her mother made her promise that she would not climb any more trees. May solemnly promised and ran as fast as she could to the top of the hill.

There she found Mr. Shaker waiting for her. He sat on the root that was so high out of the ground that it made a bench. He gazed at the lady in the mountain. When May rushed up to him, he didn't even turn his head, but quietly said, "I'm glad you're alright my little friend. You gave me quite a scare."

May sat with him and watched the sleeping lady too.

The years wore on and May and Mr. Shaker had many fun adventures together. May's parents worried that she spent so much time alone, but as she was a good child and did well in her classes, they didn't want to reprimand her for it. As May grew, her attention did begin to turn towards her after school sports and friends, but she always made sure to spend time with her best friend.

Yet, it was not May's diverted attention that separated her from Mr. Shaker, it was not her growing up and losing interest in her childish games. Her father took a job nearer to the city and the whole family had to move away from their comfortable little house nestled among the hills.

May was heartbroken. She loved her home and her friends and the hills she had roamed all her life. Her remaining days with Mr. Shaker were sad for them both. They tried to be cheerful around one another, but it was almost too hard with the knowledge of their separation weighing them down. May feebly promised to return to visit, but both knew that it wouldn't happen.

On a bright Saturday morning, May made one last trip up her beloved hill. She arrived very early for the family was to leave soon and May wanted to spend every last moment with her friends. She watched the sleeping lady of the mountain and in her heart whispered silent goodbyes. Mr. Shaker found her there staring at the lady, tears welling up in her eyes. He sat next to her and stared off as well.

They didn't say much to one another. There wasn't any more left to say, except the inevitable. When May's mother hollered that it was time to leave. May stood, tears streaming down her face. Mr. Shaker nodded his head and May did likewise. There silent goodbye telling each what they needed to hear.

May ran down the hill as fast as she could and climbed into the car without a backwards glance. Mr. Shaker had stood when she took off and watched her the whole way down the hill and into the car. The whole while his face twisting with the suffering of their parting. When the car rolled down to the end of the driveway and turned onto the highway, he let out a howl of pain so violent that below him the earth shook itself awake.

Had May been able to see it, she would have seen the sleeping lady of the mountain open her long closed mouth and roar out in a rush of crumbling rock a silent howl that echoed Mr. Shaker's cry.