

Eternal Snow

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For my dear niece,
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Her earlier memories were hazy. One day, White Plume of Snow fluttered above the soaring peaks and the frozen snowfields. Suddenly, a gust of wind hurled her against a ridge, and a terrible cold froze her in place. She spent many endless days in her prison, and being forced to stay still was incredibly dull. The passing clouds and the eagles in flight filled her with envy, and when at last the sun would break through the mass of vapour that enveloped the mountain, she would implore in a thin, trembling voice:

“Oh, Father Sun, release me from this prison! Set me free!”

She cried out so much that one morning the sun took pity on her and touched her with one of its rays. Her molecules vibrated on contact, and a sweet warmth penetrated her stiffness and rigidity. Like a tiny diamond sphere, she rolled down the slope to a small stream; its turbulent waters engulfed her and swept her along in her dizzying drop down the mountainside. She bounced from cascade to cascade, ever falling, until suddenly the stream buried itself in a crevice, stopping abruptly. That phase lasted a long, long time. Plunged in deep darkness, she tumbled from the bosom of the mountain as if through a gigantic filter.

Finally, when she was convinced that she would be entombed in the darkness forever, she surged up one morning in the cavern of a grotto. Filled with joy, she trickled down the length of a stalactite and, suspended on its tip, looked around from her newfound vantage point.

That open cave carved in the living rock was one of astounding beauty. A strange and fantastic clarity illuminated it, giving its walls tones of porphyry and alabaster. She saw a small spring overflowing with crystalline water near the entrance.

Even though everything there seemed delightfully pretty to her, she found that nothing could equal her beauty. She was absolutely transparent, pierced through by the rays of light reflecting all the hues of a prism. At times she had the brilliance of pure water; at other times that of an opal, a turquoise, a ruby, or a pale sapphire.

Swelling with pride, she detached from the stalactite and fell into the fountain.

The sound of delicate wings soon woke the silent echoes of the grotto; the proud droplet saw a bustling commotion of diminutive black and white-feathered birds perching on the lip of the fountain: it was a flight of swallows. The smallest ones approached first; they stretched out their iridescent necks and drank deliciously, while the older ones waited patiently for their turn and said,

“Drink to your hearts’ content. Today we will cross the sea!”

And the traveler from the mountain was astonished to see that the drops of water around her seemed to offer themselves up happily to the greedy little beaks that scooped them up one by one with a musical, rhythmic gurgle.

“How could this be?” she said. “To die so that these ugly fowls can quench their thirst! What fools they are!”

And fleeing from the thirsty birds, she gathered up her molecules and went down to the bottom.

When she rose to the surface, the flock had already lifted into flight, and all she could see was a tiny spot in the intense blue background.

“They are going to search for the sea,” she thought. “I wonder what sort of thing the sea might be?”

And the desire to leave and roam around the world again overtook her. She circled the spring looking for an exit until she found a small gap in the granite basin where a trickle of water ran. Cheerfully she threw herself into the current, which, ever swelling from the filtrations of the mountain, reached the valley and turned into a pretty brook of crystal-clear water. Oh, what a splendid journey! The banks of the channel disappeared below a dense carpet of flowers. Violets, lilies, rushes, and Madonna lilies all propped themselves up on their stalks to contemplate the current, flirtatiously tossing their pollen-laden stamens. They spoke:

“Stream, we owe you everything! You are the coolness that gives us life, the shade of our petals, and the aroma of our calyces. Stop for a moment to receive the offering of the ones you love.”

But the stream, without pausing in its run, murmured:

“I can’t stop. The slope compels me onward. But, take my advice. Soak your roots well because the sun has dispersed the clouds and will flood the fields today with a rain of fire.”

And the plants, obedient to its counsel, lengthened their roots under the ground and absorbed the cold liquid anxiously.

The fugitive from the spring slid against the bank, trying to get above the surface in order to better see the scenery. As she brushed up against a stone, she was hindered by a small root sticking out of a crack. She suddenly saw a violet with withered petals. It leaned over its stem and told the traveler:

“My roots have not reached the water in two long days, and my hours are numbered. Without a bit of moisture, I will hopelessly perish today. Give me life, merciful droplet, and in exchange I will transform you into the divine nectar the butterflies sip or exhale you to the air as exquisite perfume.

But the droplet, backing away, answered disdainfully,

“Keep your nectar and your perfume. I will never give up even a single molecule. My life is worth more than yours. Goodbye!”

And she turned, sliding voluptuously down the length of the flowered shores, avoiding all ruinous contact. She stayed away from the roots, the birds, and the gills of the small fish teeming in the backwater.

Suddenly the sky, the sun, and the scenery disappeared without warning. The stream had plunged again into the earth and rushed through the shadows to an unknown destination.

Dragged by the underground torrent, the child of the sun and the snow feared that a crash into an invisible obstacle would break her apart, so she increased the cohesion between her atoms. And when the tumultuous waves settled, she remained intact. She was so dazed that she could not determine whether her wild race had lasted a minute or a century.

Even though the darkness was profound, she grew conscious of the fact that she was submerged in a mass of denser water than that of the stream, in which she was rising like a bubble of air. A faint light from above was gradually dissipating the shadows. She was shooting upwards as fast as an arrow. Before she knew what was happening around her, she again found herself under the sunlit sky.

How strange that setting seemed to her! Neither trees nor hills nor mountains limited the excessive expanse of the horizon. All around, a sheet of emerald spread out to the farthest limit, as if it had been melted in a vast crucible.

Lost in the immensity, the vagabond from the stream was nodding off atop the waves when a shadow blocked the sun. It was a small bird whose wings almost skimmed the fluid grassland. At that, the drop of water recognized it to be one of the sparrows that drank in the mountain spring. The bird had seen her as well, and flapping its exhausted wings, gasped:

“God, doubtless, has placed you in my path. Thirst is tormenting me and weakens my effort, and I can barely keep myself aloft. I was abandoned by my sisters, and the immense sea will be my tomb if you do not let me drink you to quench my thirst and cool

my scorching beak. If you consent, however, I can still reach the shore where springtime and happiness await me.”

But the lone drop answered:

“If I were to disappear, for whom would the sun glow and the stars shine? The universe would have no reason for being. Your request is absurd and far too ridiculous. Enchanted by my beauty, the salty ocean took me as its bride. I am the queen of the sea!”

The dying bird insisted and begged in vain, circling around the merciless one, until it finally plunged into the waves, its strength drained. It made a supreme effort and rose out of the water. Still, its wet wings refused to hold it aloft above the salty and treacherous waves, and it sank below them forever.

When it had disappeared, the little drop of fresh water said weightily:

“You get what you deserve. Good riddance with the pretentiousness and petulance of that drunkard vagabond of the air!”

Rising to its zenith, the sun shed the hot radiation of its eternal fire over the sea. The careless droplet, which floated on the surface lazily, felt the unexpected burning of terrible heat. And before she could avoid it, she found herself transformed into a light wisp of vapour which rose through the rarefied air up to an immeasurable height. A current of wind dragged her over the ocean to a point where she once again glimpsed valleys, hills, and mountains as she fell.

Submerged in a shroud of vapour, its white canopy covering an expansive countryside weakened by the heat, she heard a clamour rising from the earth and filling the space. It was the wailing voices of the plants, imploring:

“Oh clouds, give us something to drink! We are dying of thirst! While the sun burns and consumes us, our roots find not a drop of moisture in the scorched earth. We will surely perish if you do not send down at least a light drizzle. Rain, clouds of the sky, rain!”

And the clouds, filled with pity, condensed themselves in tiny droplets which flooded the thirsty fields with copious rain.

But the drop of water vaporized by the sun, also floated among the mist, and said:

“It’s much more beautiful to wander on a great adventure through the blue sky than to mix oneself with the earth and turn to mud. I wasn’t born for that.” And, making herself as indistinct as she could, she left the clouds below and climbed very high up to the zenith. But when she was spellbound contemplating the vast horizon, an impetuous wind from the sea dragged her up to the snowy peak of an exceptionally tall mountain. Before she realized what was happening, she found herself abruptly changed into a light plume of snow which descended over the summit, where she instantly solidified.

Inexplicable anguish overwhelmed her. She was once again where she had started, and she heard a murmur at her side:

“Here returns one of the chosen! Neither in pollen nor in dew did she squander any of her molecules. She is thus worthy of occupying this excellent seat of honour. We hate crude transformation, and as symbols of supreme beauty, our mission is to remain immutable and inaccessible in space and time.”

But the anxious and grieving prisoner, without attending to the voice of the mountain, felt a horrible cold seep into her. She turned towards the sun on the horizon, and cried:

“Oh, Father Sun! Have pity! Set me free!”

But the sun, which here had no strength or heat at all, answered her:

“I can do nothing to the eternal snow, even though against it the dawn works harder, and the sunset works later. Like the granite under it, my rays will never melt it.”