

The Master and the Student.

I sit on the bench outside my house. The wind whistles around me, tugging at my robes, as I sit there looking out over the valleys and the lesser mountains that cluster around the Behemoth, the highest mountain in the world. My little house sits a short distance away from the trail up the mountain.

It's early. The climbers have not yet started to appear. Down in the valleys the mist is burning away as the sun reaches into the nooks and crannies, leaving few places untouched. It will be a blue sky day, wispy clouds doing little to attenuate the rays from the sun.

Tattered lines of prayer flags flutter from the pole that someone set up just down the slope a few years ago. The older flags have been bleached and frayed, while the wind is only just beginning to tear apart the material of the newer ones.

The climbers believe that tying a flag to the pole will bring them luck, and the porters indulge them in this fantasy. I laugh inwardly. Such conceit! As if the deity, if there is one, had the time or the desire to watch over them! Many had hung flags, and never returned. The Behemoth consumed them, as the porters say.

I remember a boy. Quite young. His flag, about two metres long, was covered in small representations of the flag of a nation far away. There wasn't much room on the line, but he managed to hang his pennant. He saw me watching him.

"Greetings, Master" he said, bowing in the local fashion.

"I'm no one's Master," I said. For some reason I am annoyed with him. I am being pedantic, since "Master" is my title, but currently I do not have a Student. "Why do you climb the mountain?"

"They tell me that you know everything. Do you not know?"

I nodded. He was testing me. "Yes, I do."

I didn't bother to explain to him the limitations of my knowledge.

"Then tell me why I climb."

"You climb because your father climbed and never came back. You hope to find out what happened to him. You feel that he deserted you. You are looking for him."

He grew angry. "Charlatan! I climb to honour his memory. I know that I won't find him!"

"As you wish."

He stomped off.

"You will never return."

He stopped and turned. "You big fake!"

I never saw him again. In a way, he found his father.

The prayer pole has many more lines now than it did then. As the lines fill up the porters add more lines, but at some time not too long in the future, someone will add a new prayer pole, closer to the path. I know it will happen.

I watch the first climbers toiling up the path. They must have started very early this morning, hours before the sun rose, to reach here as early as this. They have thick clothing, large backpacks and cylinders of oxygen. Their porters carry heavy loads. I sit there in my robes, my arms bare, and my bare feet in simple sandals.

The porters call me “sir” and leave me gifts. Food, clothing, that sort of thing. They know what I need. One of them unloads a huge bundle of firewood. Good! I’d been looking forward to getting that! They don’t ask for blessings, don’t expect me to wish them good luck, because most of them have been here before, and know that I won’t do it. They accept my thanks with a nod. I accidentally touch one man’s hand and know that he won’t be coming back, but of course, I give no sign.

The climbers bow to me, awkwardly, because it is not natural for them, and they also give me gifts. Most are useless to me, like alcohol or cigarettes. I give them to the porters when the climbers are not watching. The porters understand, and indeed, to be fair, many of the climbers do too. Once someone gave me coffee, but this high in the mountains, water boils at too low a temperature to extract the flavour properly. It was a nice thought though. One gives me a tin of sardines, and the porters look sideways at him. But I do eat meat, when I can get it, and the sardines will last me a long time. But fish, at this altitude? It is amusing.

Some of the climbers are already taking sips of oxygen. It’s strange, but they will be more likely to conquer the Behemoth and return successfully than the rest, who are conserving their oxygen and have used up much more energy just reaching this altitude. It’s a fine balance.

Many of them will return, but will not have conquered the Behemoth. They will trudge past my house in a day or two, exhausted and dispirited. Some will be scarred for life by their failure to reach the top. They do not reflect that some of their fellows will never leave the mountain.

The early risers leave and the later starters begin to arrive. These climbers are not as well-equipped as the early risers. Many of them do not have oxygen, and a few do not even have porters. They stagger up the trail, gasping for breath, and collapse on the ground near my home. I give them water and any assistance that I can.

Most of the late starters will go no further, but they will be less affected by their failure to conquer the Behemoth. They will reflect on their time on the mountain with pride. But those late starters who continue on the trail risk everything. Many, if not most, will die.

Even the late starters have either returned down the mountain or have continued on up to meet whatever fate is waiting for them. I watch the girl climbing the track with interest. She isn’t a climber. She has on outdoor clothes, but they are clothes suitable for lower levels, not for the chilly flanks of the Behemoth. She carries only a small pack on her back, and she is not using oxygen, but she doesn’t seem distressed or short of breath. She is alone and most climbers travel in groups, with porters.

She doesn’t greet me, but sits on the bench next to me and looks at the view. A trio of climbers clatters down the track past my house. A long silence ensues.

“Who are you?” I ask, finally.

“You know, Master,” she says calmly. “I am your Student.”

“I am no one’s Master,” I say sharply.

“You know better, Master.”

“Yes,” I concede. I sigh. “But how do you know that you are my Student?”

“How do you know things?”

“I just do.”

She says nothing.

“The real secret,” I say, after a long pause, “is how to NOT know things.”

“Ah. So you were serious when you asked who I was?”

It was my turn to say nothing.

We sit there most of the day.

Now and then climbers and porters pass by. This late in the day they are all coming down, and my Student and I tend to those who need it. We bandage blisters, strap strained ankles and knees, and apply potions to the scrapes and scratches to ward off infection. We can’t do much about the frostbite.

We work together well. One of us says “Can you please pass...”, only to find that the other is already holding the item out. It is very pleasant.

The sun goes down over the far mountains, and the trickle of climbers and porters drops away. One or two might pass by during the night, and one or two may knock on my door for help. I will do what I can. We will.

“We eat now,” I say, and we go into my little house. Our house, now.

She goes to my cupboard and unloads her backpack into it. She shows me the tins of minced meats, the cans of vegetables, and I smile.

“Thank you! You brought herbs and spices too.”

It’s not a question.

“You are welcome, Master. You knew I had them?”

“As I said, the secret is how to not know things. But I did know that I would taste minced meats around now.”

I cook our meal. It is mostly rice of course, cooked in a primitive pressure cooker because of the altitude, but the addition of a few vegetables from my Student’s tins makes it more tasty than usual. The vegetables donated by the porters are very welcome and nutritious, but have lost much of their flavour by the time they reach our altitude. We open a tin of meat, and allow ourselves a thin slice.

“Mmm, delectable,” I say.

“Teach me, Master. I know many things but I don’t know everything. But, Master, teach me the important thing, the secret to not knowing things.”

“I will.”

We bank the fire, and we pull shut the shutters, and we go to bed. I have only one bed in my house, but it is quite large. She strokes my bare shoulder.

“Teach me, Master,” she says.

I laugh as I wrap her in my arms. “Any young lad could teach you what you want to know right now!”

She laughs. I do not mention that her burning desire to be a mother is doomed to be unsatisfied. She will come to know it sooner or later. But, still, I teach her what she wants to know.

In the morning, I shave her head. She wears some of my old robes and sandals. I, or rather, we, make the porters aware that we would like more robes in her size and some sandals to fit her feet. It becomes known that “the Master” and “the Student” live in the house high on the flanks of the Behemoth.

I notice that she has a talent for asking for things without actually asking. The porters nod and listen to her hints. She knows the art of subtlety. They nod to her and call her “ma’am”, and she quietly accepts their deference, as I have done for years.

I teach her how to not know things. She finds it hard, as she tries to actively push the knowledge away.

“Just let it fade, If you push at it, you validate it. It makes it more real, more present. Just let it go.”

It takes six months, but she finally gets it. I’m impressed, as it took me a year. But she is slower at knowing everything.

“There are no bounds to push back,” I say. “You can know everything, but you can’t hold it all in your mind at the same time.”

One day, a year or two later, she brings me a flower. It’s a mountain flower but none grow at this altitude.

“You know everything, Student.”

“In patches, yes. But I know that it will become easier, if I want it to.”

“If you want it to?”

“Yes,” she says.

We watch the ever-changing shadows in the valleys below. The sun sinks lower in the sky and brushes a minor peak which stands up above the clouds below us. The sun sinks even lower, eventually diving into the cloud layer in a burst of reds and oranges. There may be a flash of green.

“I do,” she says. “I do want it to.”

“In spite of the cost?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I can no longer call you ‘Student’,” I joke.

She laughs. “Then what will they call us?” She gestures at the group of climbers and porters who happen to be passing.

“The cost?” she says thoughtfully. “I wanted to be a mother, to have children, but...”

“But I feel your regret keenly because of my own regret! I will never be a father.”

“That’s true. I know it. I know your regret. It’s unusually strong for a man.”

“The decision was made when you decided to climb up here.”

“Before that.”

“Before that?”

“Yes. The decision was made at the moment I was born.”

“Before that. When you were conceived.”

“Before that, Master. At the beginning of time.”

We both laugh.

It is many years later. The Behemoth still consumes climbers, but fewer come. They are better prepared, more organized, and more survive. Nowadays more visitors stop at our home. They come to see the Master and the Student, not to conquer the Behemoth.

There is now a forest of prayer poles with thousands of prayer flags. I remember when the first pole was felled by the weather and was taken away by the porters. A sadness that I had not known for a long time came over me, and the Student put her hand on my shoulder.

There is now a small shrine a little way away, and some of the porters pray at it. They help the climbers who wish to pray at it, but they know that the climbers do not understand their beliefs. The porters do not pray for themselves. They consider it to be impolite, but they smile when the climbers pray for themselves and for luck on the mountain.

The Student prayed with them once, and the porters welcomed her, even though they know that our beliefs are different. She was quiet most of the afternoon, and I touched her hand.

“It speaks directly to the emotions,” she said, smiling. “I’m just enjoying the feeling.”

The climbers and sometimes the porters come to ask us questions, the Master and the Student. We answer them and they go away satisfied or not, as the case may be. We agree, the Student and I, not to remember any of the questions and our answers. To un-know them. It’s how I have always done it, but it is time to reconsider and revalidate the decision.

The climbers and the porters sometimes camp out near our house, these days, and the Student keeps a close eye on them. Of course, we know which ones, which climbers, will leave litter and cause problems, but we cannot change the course of events. It is never the porters. Usually one of the porters cleans up, but sometimes we have to do it.

I wake up one morning with a cough. The Student wakes up and looks at me from a short distance away, her blue eyes bright with tears. We hold each other without speaking. There is no need for words.

We get up and try to carry on with our lives, but I have to cough now and then, and every time I do so, she looks over at me. I can't bring myself to ask her not to.

Over the next few days the cough gets worse, and I start to feel pain in my side. The pain spreads right across my chest, and I have to take frequent rests. The Student has to help me to get out of the bed or to stand up when I am sitting outside on the bench. She has to answer the visitors' questions and turns many of them away.

She asks a climber who is a doctor to look at me. At first I am angry.

"You know that this is pointless, Student?"

She cries. "Yes, of course I know, Master. I would much rather not know. I'm finding it hard to not know at the moment! Cut me some slack!"

I have never seen her angry, or even upset. I reconsider and comfort her. "I understand. But not knowing would make the end harder."

"Yes, Master. That is true."

She pulls herself together and we go out to consult the doctor. His diagnosis is what we had feared. Yes, even I had hope!

A day or two later, the Student helps me to go outside for the last time. There are lines and lines of porters, but no climbers. They come up to me one by one and bow. I make a bow with my hands in response. I grow tired and the Student helps me back into our house.

I struggle to breathe, pulling in one ragged breath after another. The pain is still there, but it is also somewhere else. The Student puts drips of water on my lips, while supporting my head. I raise my hand with an effort and stroke her head. We laugh because it is a while since we last shaved her head and her hair is starting to regrow. It is bristly. I cough.

"I'm going to sleep now," I whisper.

She can't have heard, but she nods and lets me lie back.

A tear falls onto his face, and I carefully wipe it away. His rasping breath has stopped and his chest no longer rises and falls. His face is relaxed, the look that people describe as 'peaceful'.

I stand and go out of our small house, and find the ranks of porters waiting.

"He's gone."

"We'll take his body to the monastery, Stud..., Mast..., ma'am." says one of them.

"Thank you."

The monastery will treat his body with respect, I know, even though we do not espouse their religion. I find that I don't care about the details. I choose not to know.

"What shall we call you, ma'am?"

“Please call me ‘ma’am’, just as you called him ‘sir’, though my title is now ‘Master’. One day there will be a new ‘Student’. You can go in now.”

He ponders the implications of the title for a moment, then nods his head.

The spokesman and four of his people enter our house, the only time that they are invited in. They have a sheet and poles ready. They carry his body out of the house and the bearers start off down the mountain. Slowly the porters all follow his body. The spokesman is the only one left.

“My grandfather carried the previous Master down the mountain. Grandfather was devoured by the Behemoth shortly afterwards. I hope that my grandchildren will carry you down the mountain when the time comes, ma’am.”

I look at him. He will have a long life and will die suddenly at an advanced age. I choose not to know about his grandchildren.

“The Behemoth will not devour your bones, but it will try, many times.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“I could be lying, of course, to make you feel better.”

He smiles. “I understand. You give and you take away. I will try not to tempt the Behemoth.”

Lowlanders would say “tempt fate”.

We bow to each other and he leaves. I sit on the bench and listen to the flapping of the prayer flags. After a while the sun dips below the horizon, and the chill wind causes me to stir. Even though the chill cannot harm me, I go into my house and stir up the embers of the fire. It burns like a fire at a much lower altitude, as it has always done. I throw some logs on the fire and start to cook my evening meal.

I consider my grief. At one level I am wailing inwardly, but because of my calling I have been grieving for a long time. For as long as I have known that I was the Student, and now the Master. I know that I will grieve outwardly, I will wail, in the future, but for the moment I am outwardly calm. The time will come when I will break down and the Teacher from the monastery will ascend the mountain and help me.

In a strange way, I almost look forward to it. To give myself up to the grief means to let go of my responsibilities. It may not seem much – to live high on the flanks of the Behemoth, to know everything, to answer the questions of those who come seeking advice – but it weighs heavily on all Students and Masters. To lay down the burden, just for a while, seems almost worth the black despair. Almost.

Later I go to bed. The bed lacks the warmth of another body and I find it hard to sleep. I catch a glimpse of my Student but it will be years before he or she arrives. He or she is in a big city, cars everywhere and neon lights. I intentionally don’t know any details, but console myself with the thought that he or she exists, and drop into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning I breakfast and sit on the bench in the early sun. A bank of cloud promises an inclement day down below, but it is rare that that sort of cloud reaches my altitude. It will be a quiet day, and indeed it is late before a figure trudges up the trail. He has an oxygen bottle on his pack,

but he is not a climber, and not a porter. Someone in search of an answer, then. An answer important to him, otherwise he would not have climbed the flanks of the Behemoth.

He comes up to my house and stops. He bows, and puts a gift on the bench next to me.

“Master?” He seems doubtful.

“Welcome, and though I’m not currently anyone’s Master, that is my title. Call me ‘ma’am’, please,” I say, and do the sitting bow.

He returns the bow and relaxes. “I have a question, ma’am.”

And I know what his question will be, and I know what advice I will give him. I will un-know it after our talk.

“Yes, I know. It’s about your son, isn’t it? Please sit on my bench and tell me about it.”
