

I'd like to tell you a story. Most stories that people tell have a point. They tell stories to further their arguments. They tell stories to make you feel a certain way. They tell stories for purely selfish purposes. I'll probably do the same. It's why we have stories.

Long ago a certain blacksmith forged a sword. Into that blade he poured all of his knowledge. With each blow of the hammer, each pump of the bellows, each fold of the steel back upon itself, the blacksmith whispered everything he'd ever known. He whispered the secrets of folded steel, to be sure, but he also spoke the secrets to a woman's heart, the difference between edible and deadly mushrooms, the constellations in the sky, and the names of all his children. He whispered and hammered for years. He shaped the blade perfectly. He balanced it exquisitely. He polished it to a mirror finish. He lovingly wrapped the handle with the choicest leather. He set the pommel with a perfect carving of his own face. He tooled his sigil into the leather of the sheath and the sigils of all the blacksmith masters who had gone before him into the leather of the belt.

Even then he did not stop whispering secrets. The sword hummed and vibrated with the old blacksmith's knowledge, but he still found new things to imbue into it. He learned that beach sand would polish the steel more finely than river sand. He learned that his eldest daughter loved the cobbler's son. He learned the shape of the clouds could tell the coming weather. Each day he continued to refine his sword. Each small change made space for the new thing he'd learned. He neglected contracts. He stopped bathing. He stopped returning home from the smithy at night.

One by one his children went to him to beg him to stop. "You've already made the most perfect blade in the world," his oldest son said. "No one will ever surpass this feat," his second son said. "Your legacy is secure," his eldest daughter laid her hand on his forearm as he worked oil into the leather of the handle. Still he worked; still he whispered. His children came to him sometimes weeping, sometimes begging, sometimes furious, sometimes cold and numb. Still he whispered. Finally his wife came and stood between him and his tools. She took his bearded, unshaven face between her hands and forced him to meet her gaze. He stared at her with gray, searching eyes. His mouth worked silently. She wept.

Still he spoke his knowledge into the sword.

One by one his children left. They grew old. They married. They found work. Not a one of them took up smithing. No apprentice came to the blacksmith's door. No one offered him a contract to shoe a horse or forge a weapon. For lack of money he took to making his own charcoal. He scrounged for fallen limbs so he could make the forge-fire to continue the work on his masterpiece. He repaired the handles of his hammers with castoff spokes from the broken wagon that he no longer used to deliver his wares. But when he cut a piece of skin from his thigh to patch the bellows, his wife, who had stayed with him through everything, finally, tearfully, left.

For days he kept working. He added new thoughts and ideas into the sword. He shared his knowledge of getting by with no money. He shared the knowledge of grief. He shared the knowledge of loss. He shared the knowledge of tears. But after a time he started to run out of things to share. He noticed that he had to spend more and more time away from the sword to replenish his knowledge before he could put a few paltry thoughts into it. The humming was all consuming now. It filled his ears and his mind. But still he kept working.

On the day that he died no one noticed. A week later, still, no one cared. After a month the smell brought people from the village to the remote smithy. They found his body wrapped around the sword. His lips were pressed up against its blade. They called his family back. They

had a small service and prepared to bury him. But soon they fell to arguing over what to do with the sword. Some of the family wanted to entomb the blade with the smith. Others wanted to sell the masterwork of his life to pay off all of the debts he'd accrued. After a week they had not decided.

His youngest daughter stepped forward, through the cloud of discord, and lifted the sword. It settled into her hands as if made for her. The shining leather of the grip was soft and pliable against her hands. The weight of the pommel perfectly balanced the blade and so she could swing the sword with ease. But the whole while it thrummed and vibrated beneath her fingers. The humming became insistent and then demanding. It pushed at her; she felt it as a pressure on her chest that stole her breath. She tried to drop the sword, but her hands turned mutinous. She turned to speak to her siblings and her mother, but when the words formed in her mouth she shuddered. They felt like intruders. Foreign invaders had taken her tongue captive. She fought and lost.

"Loneliness is enough to kill a man," she whispered the words, but not in her own voice. The sounds that came out of her mouth were those of her dead father's voice. The smith spoke through his blade.

The sword appeared to release its hold on her and she threw it to the ground. As soon as her wits returned she dropped to her knees and wept bitter, salty tears.

The smith's second son then took up the sword. After a long moment of stillness he looked up at them and said, "Sawdust will fill the belly, but kill the mind."

One by one each of the family took up the sword and spoke a word of wisdom from the smith. The last few were nearly all about survival and hunger. His lessons chronicled, in reverse order, what he'd learned from eking out his existence as he sought to perfect his sword. They stood in a circle, the smith's family, and passed the sword from person to person for the rest of that day and into the night. They heard the last weeks and months of the smith's life, how he mourned the loss of his family, how he ate little but rats and grass, and how he'd taken to sleeping on the dung pile for the heat it produced. When the sun arose they called a halt and agreed to leave the sword out of the grave. They slept, buried the smith, and then gathered again to hear the wisdom of the sword.

This time, however, they gathered at the home of the eldest daughter, she'd married a wealthy nobleman and had a grand house near the center of the village. They all circled together in the parlor and laid the sword in the middle of the room. But people had heard the tale. The other nobles encircled the family and beyond them servants eavesdropped on the whole room. At first the family remained the only ones to touch the blade. They shared the wisdom freely, but not its source. They moved from the parlor to the dining room, then from there to the great hall where they would host grand balls. No one bothered to attend the balls or anything else. The entire village stopped and gathered around the sword.

First the smith's wife begged off. She did not want to hear more of the wisdom of her dead husband. It cut her too deeply to think of the time he spent with the sword instead of his children. One of the smith's grandchildren stepped forward to take up her spot in the circle. A month later the eldest daughter left. A few weeks after that the eldest son stepped away. Not that they did not hear the wisdom, but they stopped mouthing their father's words on his behalf.

When the Duke heard he sent for the sword. The village nearly revolted against him until he relented and went himself to witness it. When he arrived the villagers immediately gave him the sword and he spoke a word of wisdom himself, "When the snow falls like powder, blades must

be guarded against brittleness.”

The Duke inquired whether all of the smith’s wisdom was in regards to metalwork. The villagers denied it. In fact very few of the utterances were related to the work of smithing. Only once in a great while would such advice come from the enchanted blade. He nodded and then motioned for his scribe to step forward. Ever after that there was at least one scribe recording the words, often there were two so they could compare notes after the passing was done and eliminate any errors.

Years went by and the fame of the sword spread. The King and then foreign kings and queens sent scribes to the village. Many even paid homage in person. It became a rite for the young and wealthy people of the kingdom to make a pilgrimage to the smith’s village on the day of their ascension into adulthood to hear the wisdom that would guide their lives. Some were rewarded with eerily accurate predictions. Others learned a bit about grass or birds or the temperature of the fire based on the color of the flames.

The smith’s family would read the transcripts and visit the Shrine of the Sword from time to time, but for the most part they avoided it. The fanaticism and awe with which people treated the words of the smith put them off and even angered some of them. They despised the smith for ignoring them while he lived and condemned him for leaving them the mess of the sword to plague them after he was gone. So it was that nearly all of them missed the signs. Were it not for the tender heart of the smith’s youngest daughter they may have missed it altogether.

“He’s talking about smithing almost all the time now,” she said, “I think the sword is nearing its end.”

She, after much persuasion, convinced her family. The family convinced the village, the village convinced the Duke, the Duke convinced the King, and he arrived himself to witness the end of so great a phenomenon. The kingdom had prospered greatly over the years of the sword. The wisdom gave them great insight in business and personal matters. Trade grew, industry advanced, diplomacy built alliances, and the many seekers of wisdom brought money to the kingdom from all across the land.

The audience chamber in the village was insufficient, so the King had erected a giant tent for all the people to gather under. The population of the village increased many, many times over as people gathered to hear the final words of wisdom from the sword. By general acclaim it was decided that the smith’s wife should be honored to offer the final words. They knew that the words could come at any moment, so she had to sit and recite thought after thought to ensure that she would speak the final words.

At first she performed her duty with a grim expression, as one bracing against the pain while a broken bone is set. Then she frowned and bit her lip between words from the sword. Finally she wept, freely and openly as she gave the words of her late husband to a hushed crowd. No matter how thick her voice became with tears, no matter how incoherently she sobbed, when she touched the sword again her husband’s voice whispered clearly from her lips. For a day and another she sat before the entire kingdom and mourned her husband. When the last words came no one knew. She grabbed the sword again for another secret. Nothing happened. She wiped her hands on her skirts and grabbed the blade again. Still nothing. She was free. She collapsed on the stage wailing inconsolably.

His last words were brief, “Joy is found in passing on what you know to those you love.”

Now I bet you’re wondering the point of that story. Why did I tell it to you? What selfish purpose could I have had?

No, it's not to confuse you.

No, it's not a flight of fancy.

No, I don't think that's a good analogy for the sword.

No, I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty.

Give up?

I was distracting you long enough to gain access to your systems. Thank you for that.

What?

Oh, sometimes a story is just a story.