

Immortals

Huangshan. A mountain renowned for its unworldly features, each entwined with breathtaking tales. It's the motherland of ancient religions, the epitome natural beauty, the birthplace of mystifying legends. I have arrived.

Beads of sweat drip past my eyelashes, blurring the empty path ahead. Apathetic, regiments of bony trees cowardly shy away, exposing me to the sun's harsh glare. I kick the soil, angry at myself. I should've started earlier this morning. As if on cue, a thick layer of fog cloaks the mountain, shading it from the harsh daylight. Unfazed, my eyes refocus on the pearly clouds above, and I steadily hike towards the peak. Flecks of soil wrap around my aching toes, sinking my tattered sandals into the muddy earth. Still, I soldier forward, my mother's story ricocheting in my mind.

Mother told me about an elixir, a mystical extract nestled on the top of China's tallest mountain. Granting eternal life, the elixir allows the most worthy to transcend time and space. All the children in the village would listen to her stories, enchanted by the prospect of immortality. As time went on, most of my peers dismissed this as a mere folktale, laughing whenever it was mentioned. Yet, I'm undeniably sure it exists; the evidence is unmistakable.

It was many years ago, but the traveller's perplexing smile is still fresh in my mind. Known for being an impatient worrier, a neighbouring shopkeeper climbed Huangshan to relieve his stress. I remember seeing him after his journey, his eyes so calm yet so fulfilled. Despite the pain, suffering and misfortunes of the world, he was completely at peace. I suppose, with all the time in the universe, all kinds of worries would disappear. He left a few weeks later, to follow his dreams. I still think of him, many years later.

I have to get the elixir. The doctor said I'm running out of time.

I started my journey twelve days ago. Guided by a water compass, I hiked to Huangshan City, hundreds of miles away from my home province of Shanxi. I trekked, by foot, over acres of verdant forests, deserted plains and boundless fields. I stop to rest, realising that I'm mere days away from the coveted elixir.

In front of me, a Buddhist monk meditates, mumbling a rhythmic verse. Alarmed, I stare at the curious figure: legs crossed, hands turned upwards, as still as the rocks beside him. A crimson robe was draped neatly across his chest, with waves of creases elegantly cascading. He smiles as I walk past, pressing his lips into a thin crescent. He must've come from the Buddhist temples at the foot of the mountain. I remember passing by the stubby structures, each topped with a curved brick hat. Humbly built and proudly displayed, the

temples are decorated by years of worship, devotion and history. Monks have roamed the side of the mountain since the Southern Dynasties, with a wealth of knowledge accumulated over countless generations.

“Need any help, boy?” he says kindly. The wind huffs loudly from behind the trees, but the monk’s soft voice is crystal clear.

“Erm... I mean, yes. I need to go up the mountain, sir. I don’t know the way there, and I really need some help. But I wouldn’t want to bother you, of course.”

“Don’t worry about that, I have all the time in the world.” The monk rises and beckons me to follow him. He begins hiking up the steep path without a twinge of hesitation. I was shocked by his casual willingness. Climbing Huangshan is a dangerous journey for even the most experienced athletes, let alone a barefoot monk. Deep wrinkles crease into his tanned skin, a natural display of his advanced age. Yet, he glides smoothly up the rocky trail, completely at ease. I wonder if he aged at will, perhaps as a result of the elixir.

“I’m Ping.” I say, itching my dry throat. He stops and nods. Without a reply, he continues his ascent. Like a young duckling, I follow closely behind.

Step by step, we trek up the mountain. Cleanly shaved, the monk’s bald head shows no sign of perspiration, but I’m already overwhelmed by pain and fatigue. Clawing my nimble fingers into soft soil, I heave myself up the slope’s ancient steps, carved by centuries of humble footsteps. The wind mocks my woeful technique, spitting bursts of air onto my dry face. A thick, humid breath rushes into my nostrils, barring cool air from relieving my lungs. I grunt pitifully, trying to think about the blissful elixir instead.

Suddenly, a sharp rock slices the side of my ankle, inducing a fiery, acute pain.

“Ouch! These stupid, spiky rocks.” I cry miserably.

The sensation is magnified by prickly ferns, tickling my raw skin and gifting it a pinkish hue. I persevere, forcing one leg in front of the other. Yet, the pain persists, festering like a rabid disease. More and more often, a jagged blade hungrily targets my chafed skin, mercilessly piercing towards my bone. Bending down to rub my leg, I trip, scraping both my knees.

The monk turns around, staring serenely at my injury. I follow his gaze. My skin becomes an abstract watercolour, dyed with glistening shades of red. Emotionless, the monk plucks an oily leaf from the ground. He hands it to me, and I rub it on my skin. I feel better.

“The rocks,” he voices “are here to serve their purpose. They don’t want to hurt you.”

Nodding, I sigh. I guess when I become immortal, I'd be like that too, wiser and kinder. Remembering the elixir, my footsteps quicken, scurrying along the barren route.

The faint, buzzing tune of dragonflies are calmingly constant. But the rocks are silent, and the sound of our pattering footsteps echo through the mountain.

A herd of golden monkeys stands stiffly on an adjacent cliff, ears twitching at the sound of rustling leaves. Their amber eyes are flushed with burning desire, the grating hunger seen in animals and humans alike. Greedily, their open mouths water at the sight of fresh fruits. After scampering up a stumpy tree, their bony fingers curl around juicy plums. They munch on the fruits, spraying sugary juices all around. Watching them, a band of colourful butterflies skip elegantly over the uneaten plums, twirling in a choreographed routine.

Realising that I've stopped in front of the animals, I run to catch up with the monk. He has been waiting for me at a distance, allowing me some privacy when appreciating the wonders of Huangshan. Mumbling, I thank the monk. He doesn't turn around, but I can sense that he understands my gratefulness.

After hours of silent walking, we reach the heaven ladder ascending the Tiandu Peak. The aged wooden slabs lining the path are tied together by braided ropes; in between is a narrow path, barely wide enough to fit a single person. The monk ascends the ladder, drifting up the trail. The wind pushes the path's railings into a swinging rhythm, but the monk is undaunted. Majestically, the fog spreads, allowing me to see the breathtaking view surrounding the peak. Grotesque rock formations are layered into multi-tiered sculptures, minimalistically decorated with clusters of pine trees. The nasally creaks of the railings dare me to go forward, but the lowering sun holds me back.

As always, the monk strolls confidently. We haven't talked since the morning, but my faded footsteps made him turn around.

"One foot after the other. Chest up. Balance." the monk calls from the mountain's peak. His soothing voice travels with a soft breeze, finally reaching my nervous self. Still hesitant, I inch onto the pathway. Gradually, the ladder narrows; I realise I'm one misstep away from being swallowed up by the deep gorge.

Balance. The word echoes in my mind. My slow movements adapt to the quivering winds, mimicking the tranquil aura of a clouded leopard. The fog hinders my vision, but the sweet smell of pine keeps me going forward.

At last, we reach the Tiandu peak. The air is chilly, but a wave of joy keeps me warm. I must be near the elixir of immortality! According to legend, Emperor Xuanyan crafted the elixir from moraine stones, eroded over centuries by icy glaciers. The thin air reminds me that I'm almost at China's highest peak; I haven't felt this happy for a long while.

The sun descends over the horizon, and the navy sky triumphs over its yellow glow. In between, a timid olive hue blends the two colours, transitioning us from day to night. Still, guided by the shimmering stars, we continue the hike. Dark clouds twist and bend in front of the full moon, contorting into different shapes. A rooster playing a *dizi* flute, a mandarin duck slurping *chow mein*, a peacock performing a fan dance. I smile, I haven't wondered about the clouds since I was a young boy.

The atmosphere is quite cool now. A brisk breeze whisks the sweat off my forehead, and the dropping temperature makes me hope for snow. Eventually, a sheet of darkness submerges the mountain; we keep walking in complete darkness.

By then, I have gotten used to the repetitive steps, meticulously carved over a thousand years ago. Ahead of me is the monk's dark silhouette, progressing steadily up the slope. His quiet energy radiates around him, enabling me to follow him through the night. At last, the monk stops, signalling that we have arrived. I fall asleep under a metasequoia tree.

My eyes flutter open at the soft light of sunrise. Before me is a bewildering view. Clusters of porcelain clouds crown the mountain's peak, and I feel a mix of honour and awe. I can sense that I'm getting close to the elixir of immortality. I can feel it. Engrossed by the astounding scene, my mind can't begin to capture the mountain's boundless detail. Silver pheasants flutter their inked wings, performing in a kaleidoscopic pattern. The dance continues, painting a moving calligraphy for just the monk and I. I pity those who have never had this experience.

The sea of clouds form a perfect heaven, one only present in myths and fairytales. No recreation, no matter how advanced, could ever challenge the hidden glory in the highest point of China. My mind flashes to the dull lines I've repeated in school, now enlivened by the mountain's view. Li Bai's poem, buried since primary school, resurfaces in my mind, and it is only now that I understand the beauty of Huangshan. Now that I have entered the *sky mountain world*, I finally understand Li Bai's deep admiration for it.

All that's left is to acquire the elixir.

Suddenly, I feel a pang of guilt. I have never told the monk the real reason I sought his help. I must've taken advantage of his goodwill. Shame reddens my wind streaked

cheeks as I reluctantly approach the monk to explain myself. The monk is squatted, observing shallow streams of water. The delicate lagoons weave into round estuaries, crafting an intricate pattern of brush strokes, thick and thin. Taking a deep breath, I venture my first sentence.

“I... I never told you the reason I came here. I wanted, no, needed, the elixir of immortality, and... and you were there to guide me. I'm sorry I mislead you. I never meant to do it.”

“I figured.” says the monk, chuckling. “You're not the first one. Besides, there's no such thing as the elixir of immortality.”

Shocked, my mouth hangs open, and my mind flashes to the doctor's frightful message from just a few weeks ago.

Last year, I started having pinching sensations in my head. I went to the village healer, who has always made my illnesses go away. But this time, my pain lingered for far too long. Upon my mother's urges, I reluctantly visited a hospital miles away, with almost half of my total savings.

One step into the building, a cacophony of mechanical sounds, anxious footsteps and beeping machines immediately overwhelmed me. Nervously, I went to register with an impatient nurse, who transferred me from room to room. Blinded by blaring hospital lights, I was jabbed with needles and syringes. I was tested with odd frequencies, asked questions I couldn't answer and screened with almost every machine in the hospital. Around me, doctors and nurses scribbled my data onto mono color clipboards; I couldn't understand a thing.

Finally, I was brought into a white chamber at the far end of the hospital. It was too quiet, too empty. I should have known. The doctor, completely covered by thick masks and white lab coats, sat me down and told me what was going on.

A brain tumour. The doctor continued droning on with my test results and reports, but all I could think about is my future disappearing. I had a life, a family, and so many hopes and dreams. I was not ready for the end of my life. My little sister just turned eleven, and I wanted to do so much with her.

“How much time do I have?” I blurted out, fearing the answer.

“I’m afraid there’s no treatment for your illness. There is treatment to help with the pain, but it’s not a cure. You have about four years left, eight maximum.”

Eight years. I wouldn’t be able to get through my sister’s twentieth birthday. It was at that moment that I knew I had to hike Huangshan. I took some painkillers before leaving home the next morning.

My worries, which have been bubbling in my mind since I commenced the journey, spills from my cracked lips.

“But I need immortality. I want to be here, permanently. I want to see the village children fulfil their destinies, I want to take care of my parents as they enter the best years of their life, and I want to see the world, to see it flourishing and advancing. The doctor told me I only have a few years left. I didn’t want to tell you, but... but you already know, don’t you?” I stare at my dulling hands, veins becoming increasingly prominent.

“I knew.” the monk says simply. “Nothing is permanent, Ping. Take the mountain for instance. It looks permanent, undeterred by the jealous winds and pestering seas. But time changes it all the same. 50 million years ago, the whole mountain was submerged under sea water, surrounded by waltzing fishes and spiralling ammonites. Eons ago, dinosaurs flew all over the peak. Now, their egg fossils are sunk under the soil, covered by millennia of clay and dust.

“But the mountains are still here! They haven’t changed.”

“What is the mountain anyway? It’s just a collection of rocks, and they come and go according to nature’s commands. 400 million years ago, the mountain was just a little mound under the sea. The Lotus Peak, where we’re on right now, was formed many years after that. Sometimes the peaks existed, sometimes it didn’t. Even the mountain has never and will never be permanent. There’s just no point, Ping.”

I ponder upon the monk’s words. I think about the rocks that I was frustrated with just yesterday. Were they part of the imperious cliffs, gallantly framing the ocean? Were they at the highest peak of the highest mountain, staring down at the kingdom beneath it? Or are they going to be part of something greater, even unimaginable, in the future... The rocks never worry about being built up or torn down, but they form something beautiful all the same. I peek at my scarred ankle; the wounds are now sealed with a dusty scab. It wasn’t a big deal after all, was it?

“What is permanent,” the monk continues, “are the memories, shared by poets across China, influencing artists across the earth. Your interpretation of the mountain transcends its physical changes. The beauty and wisdom of the world is useless if you can’t appreciate it.”

I feel enlightened by the monk’s profound words. I realise I don’t need more time, I just need to spend it wisely. Looking down from the peak, I could spy some other travellers, sprinkled across the slope of the mountain. From above, humans are so small. There’s a joy in being a fleeting shadow in mankind’s history, so that the precious time devoted to loved ones is incomparably valuable.

Life isn’t about getting things, but enjoying it. Physical things don’t last forever; it’s the memories that persist.

The monk bends down and plucks lush leaves from a large tree, dropping them into a pitcher of water. Rubbing two wooden sticks, he lights a small fire under the pitcher, allowing the leaves’ colour to diffuse. He pours a cup of *Maofeng* tea for me, then another for himself. After enjoying a long sip of tea together, the monk gestures for me to go on. I think he wants to stay for a while, but I’d like to go home. I thank the monk for the journey, holding on to his wisdom. Life’s joyful surprises, meaningful connections and unforgettable journeys resurface in my mind; my eyes sparkle with peace and contentment.

I go down the mountain, with a taste of immortality.

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