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Old Gnarled Grizzlebat was an Ogre

by Thomas Benjamin deMayo

Grizzlebat lived on a mountain, and he was constantly going up and down and over it to see if anyone was there. People didn't like Grizzlebat, but Grizzlebat liked people even less. All the folk for miles around told horrible stories about him and the things he did. Most of them were true.

There was one man, though, who came to the mountain often, and Grizzlebat didn't dislike him too badly. His name was Hurst. His ancestors had lived on the ridge when Bright-Helm had ruled in the valley bellow, and when he had fallen, they had not moved. The same with Herrick, three-hundred years later. Kings came and went, but Hurst's people, they stayed right where they were.

One day in late winter when only the pines were green, Hurst came over the top of the mountain and found Grizzlebat sitting, just sitting, on a boulder in a rock field, and gazing out over the hills. The yellow grass grew up between the stones under his feet, and there were only a few short pine trees to shade his back.

Hurst sat down next to him and pulled his walking staff up between his knees. For a while, neither spoke.

Then Grizzlebat turned his huge toothy snout towards Hurst. The ogre had a quiet voice, though it was very deep. "You're looking old. Soon I'll have to find someone else to talk to."

"I'm not as young as I was, but I'm not going to die yet."

"I wouldn't count on it. Now, or later, though, it's not very long to me."

Old gnarled Grizzlebat reached into his robe and pulled out a leather flask and a large clay bowl and set them down beside him on the rock. "I'm thirsty," he said, "Would you like some, too? It's wine I made a long time ago; the best you'll ever taste."

"Surely."

Grizzlebat poured the drink into the bowl and took a long drink. Then he handed it to Hurst. The bowl was huge and heavy in Hurst's hand and had a red pattern around the rim. Hurst tipped it just a little and poured some wine out onto a square stone in front of him.

"To whatever power watches," he said. It was an old custom and an older saying. Then Hurst drank his fill. Grizzlebat was right; it was very good. He handed the bowl back to the ogre.

"I wouldn't have done that if I were you. Sometimes it's better not to call attention to yourself."

"What could happen? Anyway, how are things for you? The bees and the hounds you keep?"

"Never mind that. Look." Grizzlebat pointed with one hand.

There on the rock where Hurst had spilt the offering, a bird had settled. It was as large a crow as any he had ever seen, but there were bands on its wings like a red-winged black-bird's. It was utterly fearless, and right in front of the two, it drank all the poured-out wine. Then it flew away.

"What can it mean?" asked Hurst.

Grizzlebat rumbled low in his belly. "I think you should go home now as fast as you may."

Hurst got up. "Goodbye to you, then. Tomorrow, I will have to bring some of my drink. Will you be here then?"

"Perhaps, but now you need to go home. Bring your wine tomorrow if you like, but it will not be as good as mine. Farewell."

Hurst hurried off. He took the fastest way home he could - he always followed old Grizzlebat's advice; it had never failed him yet. Still, he did not doubt that it had been a stranger meeting with the ogre today than most. Why shouldn't he have poured the offering? Why had the crow come? What did it all mean?

The skies clouded up as Hurst walked beneath the dark green pines, and it began to drizzle. He looked up at the thin branches against the white sky. Strange, it had been so clear. He pulled his cloak tight. It was not long before he slouched down over the ridge and down to his threshold.

His house was made of forest timbers, and soon he was inside. It had only one room, of course, and Hurst fed some wood into the fire-place and stirred the red coals. Then he sat down on his stool and listened to the rain fall.

But old gnarled Grizzlebat stayed where he was and sat humped over on the same rock. His huge wrinkled fingers rested on his lap. When Hurst had gone, he looked at the pines and said, "You can come down now; I know you're there."

The crow did not leave the branches or come to where the ogre could see him. Grizzlebat didn't look up; he only grunted.

"Be that way, if you like. It doesn't bother me."

A caw came out of the needles.

Grizzlebat looked at the square stone. "So that's it. You won't be having any more of my wine - that was foolish of him - none of my red juice. Why don't you leave him alone? Be nice to everyone. There aren't many like him left."

Another caw.

"Don't make an ogre angry - you won't like it."

The crow cackled, over and over, a horrible sound.



“Go laugh at someone else.” Grizzlebat picked up a huge stone, the very one Horst had stained with wine, and hurled it at the pine tree. It broke the trunk with into pulpy mash, but the crow rose up out of the branches, circled twice and flew away.

“Damn creature.” Grizzlebat poured more wine into the bowl and drank it all. “Haven’t seen the last of him.”

The next day Hurst went along the ridge trail, carrying some of his wine in two large skins for Grizzlebat to drink. Where the trail dipped under a hanging rock and the light poured down through the hanging branches, he met a man. He was dressed in dark clothes and was slight and fair, almost as if he were not really there, but Hurst did not notice these things: to him the man was only a stranger.

The man stood up. “Hello there. You have a heavy load; let me help you with them.”

Hurst did, indeed: the wine Grizzlebat could drink in one sitting was more than most drank in a month. But he did not take the stranger up on his offer. “Hold on, there, I’m not in such a hurry I can’t stop for a moment to talk. Who are you? You must have traveled a long way to get here; everyone in the valley knows this is Grizzlebat’s mountain and stays away.”

“Is it? Well, I’m not frightened of him.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“Maybe, but I’m a thirsty fool. As you guessed, I’ve traveled a long way. Can you spare any drink from the skins for me?”

“They’re for a friend, but I could spare a swallow or two.” He reluctantly handed one skin over to the stranger. “Not too much.”

The stranger took the wine and opened the top. He drank a little, then he drank some more. He kept on drinking and showed no signs of stopping. He drank more and more and more, more than Hurst thought anyone could drink without taking a breath.

“Hey, there! Stop! You can’t have it all.” Hurst reached out to grab the skin, but with incredible strength the stranger lashed out and struck him on the shoulder. Hurst tumbled over into the dirt.

The stranger looked up. “Here you go.”

The skin was empty. Hurst wanted to strike the evil man, but something told him not to. He just held his other skin closer and made up his mind to be on his way as quick as he could. “Goodbye,” he said, “And I hope we never meet again.” He set off quickly down the trail. He looked back once, and he saw the stranger sitting there under the hanging stone, in the sun, smiling at him.

When Hurst got to the rock field, Grizzlebat was waiting for him, just like the day before. Hurst was suddenly ashamed that he had let the stranger trick him, so he hid the empty skin under him as he sat down. He noticed the square stone was gone.

The ogre stared out into space for a while, and when he spoke, old gnarled Grizzlebat’s voice was as slow as ever. “So you’ve decided to bring some wine.” He took the one remaining skin. “I must say this doesn’t quite look like

enough for someone of my size.”

Hurst fretted as Grizzlebat drank the wine. What if the ogre found out who had drunk half his wine? Hurst had known Grizzlebat for almost forty years, and still he did not trust him or feel entirely safe around him.

Grizzlebat gave one last gurgle and put down the empty skin. “Good,” he said, “But not as good as mine.” He handed the skin back.

Then to Hurst the sky seemed to lurch, and the blue air swam. He felt a pull, as if someone far away tugged at him with an unseen hand and tore out something small and vital.

Grizzlebat looked at him with alarm. “What is it?”

The ogre’s red-flecked lips wavered, and Hurst felt dizzy. Then the feeling passed. “Nothing,” he said. “It was nothing, and now it’s gone.” Hurst stood up.

”I think I should be going now.”

“Wait,” said Grizzlebat. He reached out towards the man with his large clawed hand, but Hurst stepped aside.

“Goodbye. I’m fine; I really am. I hope you enjoyed the wine.” Hurst hurried away from the ogre. What had gotten into old Grizzlebat? And what had gotten into him?

As for Grizzlebat, he sat like an old stone for a long time, and stared out after Hurst. People were so frail, and he should know: he had killed many of them himself. Then he looked down, and he saw something on the rock where Hurst was sitting. It was a skin, a second skin. He picked it up. There was wine on the lip.

He was an old ogre, an old, old ogre, and like many who had been born long ago in the fire and heat and soil of the world’s beginning, he had a bit of magic wound about him; that was how he lived and grew weathered like the rocks, and with his old, old eyes, he saw what was hidden to all but those with the strongest second sight. On the lips of the skin he saw the print of a mouth, a mouth as old as his, and not as kind, and when he saw that print he knew all that had happened.

Old gnarled Grizzlebat leapt to his feet, and the stones in the field banged together with a noise like thunder, and many rolled right off the hill. He roared like the loudest wind. In his rage, he took up a whole pine tree, tore it in two, and threw the branches over his head.

“Curse you. Curse you. Curse you. I told you to go away.”

All that day while the sun was up, Grizzlebat sped over his mountain. If a tree was in his way, he smashed it down. If a rock was in his way, he broke it to pieces. He went up all the trails and across every stream. He was looking for the someone, and at dusk itself, he met him.

The black-robed stranger sat in the very place Hurst had left him, and he smiled a broad smile. Grizzlebat had passed this spot before, and the stranger had not been there, but this time he was.

“Where did you come from?” The ogre was so angry, he could barely speak.

The stranger was calm and at ease. Grizzlebat did not bother him, even in all his rage. “What are you talking about? I’ve been here since morning. I had a good long drink here about ten.”

Grizzlebat was so angry, he foamed like a huge boar. He gripped the stranger by the cloak and flung him against the hanging rock. “You leave him alone. You go away.”

The stranger was still smiling. “Or what? You can’t hurt me.”

Grizzlebat roared and roared. He drew back his huge fist like a tree trunk and right next to the stranger’s head, he drove it into the hanging rock. The rock clove and shattered, and to this day, that seat and its shading rock are useless. But he did not hit the stranger; he let go of his black cloak, and let him drop. Then the old ogre went away, dragging his tail after him.

Hurst sat his house all afternoon. He listened to Grizzlebat going across the mountain. He listened as the rocks split and the trees shatter. About dark the loudest sound Hurst ever heard came rolling down the mountain. Then there was a clap like thunder. After that there was no more noise from the ogre.

He built a fire in the fireplace and settled down to wait. He wondered what had made Grizzlebat so angry. He looked at his table, and then he knew. There was only one skin: he had left the other behind.

Before Hurst could even think about what to do, there came a knock at the door. He went to open it. Outside, it was night, and the stars were clear and white, and the sky was a deep blue. There stood the stranger.

“You again,” said Hurst, “What do you want?”

“To come inside for a while and sit by your fire and perhaps have more of your red wine.”

The next morning dawned clear. Grizzlebat went over to Hurst’s house, which was something he never did. He opened the little wooden door. He peered in. Then he stooped and went inside. He carried Hurst’s body out and laid it the green grass next to his wood-pile. Then he went back inside and pushed the two stools back under the table. He set the two cups back on the shelf, and he tried to wipe the red stain off the table as best he could with his sleeve.

He closed the door behind him as he left and took his friend in his huge arms. He buried Hurst in the rock field on the top of the mountain and raised a cairn of stones over him. He took the last stone from the ruins of a pine tree; it was square and squat.

He would have to find someone else to talk to, now that Hurst was gone. Grizzlebat reached down and plucked something off his sleeve; it must have stuck there when he wiped the table. It was a black feather with a red band. For a long time, he stood and watched the distant mountains.

Old gnarled Grizzlebat was an ogre. He was huge and tall. He had scaly hands and warty feet, and a long thick tail that he dragged around behind him on the ground. He wore a sackcloth robe, the hood pulled down low. People didn't like Grizzlebat, but Grizzlebat liked people even less. All the folk for miles around told horrible stories about him and the things he did. Most of them were true.

GEPPELTO'S FLAW

by Richard King Perkins II



I Love You
Hardens and splinters
On his lips
Like dried mustard
Flecking
With smiles and
Grimaces
Never truly part
of himself.

The hinge of his jaw traps

I Love You
 I Love You
 I Love You

Mimes on and again
still another
Eight hundred ninety-six grating
Times or so.

His mouth, layer caked
With tangy
Yellow condiment
Grows like the
Face of Pinocchio—
Who is,
To the unloving eye,
Simply
A wooden boy
Marionette
Fashioned and enlivened
By a hollow enigma
And an appointed
Conscience
That chirps without end
In the dangling night.