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The Mind Has Mountains

The Mind Has Mountains

by

Joanna Michal Hoyt

Maybe I'd never have seen it at all, that first time forty years ago, if I hadn't been nerve-scraped with my first visit to the city. I was thirty years old and felt about six. The lights and the sirens and the horns and the huge buildings and the signs crowded my ears and my eyes and my mind. There was nowhere to rest. And the people!

Where I came from there were more trees than people, and when I met people on the street I noticed them and looked them in the eyes and waved. In the city there were people, dozens, hundreds, everywhere, and they looked right through me. There wasn't time to notice them all, but I couldn't quite stop noticing either: a lean coppery man with a big white dog on a leash, a pale girl chewing gum, a man chasing his hat down the sidewalk, a woman waving an armful of fliers....

It looked like some of them needed help. At home there weren't so many of them at once, and mostly I knew who they were so I could do something about them. But what could I do about the woman pointing and shouting at somebody who wasn't there, or the man with the sign saying WILL WORK FOR FOOD? I tried to look away from those people, and it just made me see them clearer. I saw the mother that way too, at first.

Her skin was really black not just cafe-au-lait, and she had five kids, all below waist height, bobbing around her. Either they weren't speaking English or they were speaking it with a foreign cadence. She had a grip on the wrist of one of them, probably so he wouldn't run off, and a hand on the head of another one who seemed to be cry-

ing. The mother wasn't crying, she looked like she was done with that--she looked so tired. And there--

There, finally, was something to rest my eyes on, something smooth and soft and dark, darker than her skin, darker than anything I'd ever seen. It wove through their group, its touch slackening the boy's pull against his mother's hand, lifting the crying girl's head. The mother's hand rested on its arched neck, and she smiled a small slow certain smile, and her eyes were dark like the thing she touched. None of them looked at it. They climbed stairs and went through a door just as I registered the shape of the dark thing, the delicate hoofs, the silver-glinting eyes, the--did I really see the horn?

I thought of following them if they'd gone into a church or a store or something, but the sign above the door said *Refugee Resettlement*. I couldn't just wander in there looking for a unicorn.

That's how it was, or anyway how I think it was. Most of what I remember now--most everything, not just the city memories--is like a jumble of old photographs, not sorted, not labeled, most of the faces familiar most of the time, a few--more and more, lately--unrecognizable, some starting to fade, some stuck together, tearing when I try to separate them. But that creature, I think of it and it's almost here with me now.

Mind you, I used to look for unicorns, at least half seriously, when I was a girl. And once when I was twenty, when I thought I was in love, I thought I maybe glimpsed one. But I more than half knew it was just a drift of snow in the moonlight, just the way I more than half knew Gregory

and I couldn't make any kind of a decent life together, what with wanting different things. I got a few letters from him after he went off to law school and I went off to be a farmer's apprentice. After a while there wasn't any language in which we both could say the things we meant. Eventually I gave up on looking for that kind of love, or for unicorns either. And then, ten years later, I found one without looking at all.

I didn't believe that it lived in that city. I didn't see how it could--though maybe people had more need of it there. For the first year after I came back from the city I looked out for it, or others of its kind, on moony nights in the woods, on hot days in the garden and the hayfield when any shade would have been a joy. Of course I didn't see one, and after the first year I put the wanting by. I had enough to do, minding the goats and the hens and the garden and the people I had to tend.

Children I never had, and I missed them, maybe, more than the man who might have given me them, but other folks' children were in and out of my farm. Some hadn't been well treated. Judith...her face goes in and out of focus in my mind, like most things now, but I remember the fear in her. She'd be pleased enough picking berries with me, or trying her hand at milking the goats, or swinging from the maple tree. But let anyone come up behind her--let anyone touch her, which I did once, before I knew better--and she'd scream and shrink away down into herself.

Well, one time she came and the light was gone out of her eyes, and egg-gathering and swinging and kite-flying and carrot-pulling didn't bring it back. There I was not daring to touch her or to ask her what was wrong. I'd tried that, too, more than once, and she wouldn't ever tell, and she pulled further away just to make sure she wouldn't. Finally I set her by the pond and gave her some crackers to feed the fish with, and I went off to change the chickens' water. I wouldn't have had to do it right then, except I had to get away from her for a

minute and hit something hard and then maybe try to pray a little. I came back slowly, quietly, trying not to startle her, thinking to see what she held herself like when she didn't figure she had me to hide from.

She leaned back against the willow trunk with her shoulders relaxed, and her frozen-over blue eyes were dark and soft like the creature that lay there with its head in her lap. One of her hands was in its mane, one in the long grass-stems on her other side. She wasn't looking at it, or at anything, she was just looking, wide open, like a pool under the sky.

I took a step back and tripped over the handle of a shovel I'd left lying. I didn't fall, but I staggered a bit, and the shovel-head clanged, and she looked around with her lap empty, her shoulders braced, and a small wary light in her eyes.

It had just been a glimpse, but I was fifty-two then, old enough to know when I'd seen something and when I hadn't. I didn't know if she'd seen it. I didn't ask her anything or say anything about what I'd seen. If she had seen it, maybe a secret like that would be some balm for the hard hurting one she always carried, maybe it would give her strength to spit the other secret out one day. I reminded myself of that whenever I caught myself wishing that I could have such a fine secret of my own.

That was eighteen years ago. Two years ago the pictures in my mind started to slip out of their albums, pile up and stick together. First I couldn't remember where I'd set down my trowel or my basket of seed garlic--mind, that had happened to me sometimes right along, but it started to happen more often and faster. Then I'd go out thinking it was time to set out the tomato seedlings, and find that the tomato plants were already out and heavy with fruit.

It wasn't the disaster it might have been. My brother Ed, he'd looked set to stay single like me, but then when he was forty he married Marian, and she had twins. Michael took to boatbuilding like his father, and Lucy took to farming like me. She and

her John started working the fields that I'd never had time to do anything with except to let them out for hay, and then as I got slower they took more of the parts I'd used to do myself. They were good with me when my knees went, and they were good with me when I told them my mind was going--which wasn't a surprise to them, not by the time I'd nerved myself to say it, but I'm grateful that I worked myself up to tell them before they worked themselves up to tell me.

Last night I was in a misery with it. I'd called Lucy "Marian" three times running at supper, and asked her when she thought Sage would drop her kid, and Sage had had it three days ago, as I knew very well when it happened, and know now, but didn't know at supper, and probably won't know tomorrow, or maybe half an hour from now. And I apologized enough to get on John's nerves, and I knew it, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

Lucy did her best with us. She sent John off to fix--I forget what--and told me not to take it so hard. She said I'd put up with them when they were just learning how to do things, when she dropped a whole big tray of onion seedlings and half of them couldn't be saved (though I did tell her off for that, or maybe now I only think I did), and when he stuck the tractor in the swampy place I'd warned him about five times, and of course they didn't mind putting up with me. She was so patient at me I couldn't stand it. I went out on the porch to look at the clouds over the moon and brood. I tried to pray, and it didn't work. I tried to say the poem by...by...wait, I can remember... yes, Gerard Manley Hopkins, that's it. I used to say it to myself when I couldn't pray. Last night it was gone out of my mind, all but two bits, "Comforter, where, where is your comforting?" and "O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed..." Those said it right enough but weren't enough to soothe me. I gloomed at the sky while it gloomed back at me.

I don't know how to say what happened next. I was just standing there, clenching my hands on the porch rail, and thinking about what I'd lost already and what I was going to lose, and wishing the moon would come out so I'd have light, at least--not the porch light bulb making a little glare spot and darkening up the shadows outside its reach, but real light. I thought some third-rate poetic thoughts about the clouds obscuring the light in my mind. I shut my mouth and my eyes tight against the dark out there and wished I had something besides darkness inside. And then...

Then was the part there aren't words for. The nearest I can say is that I thought, well then, if it's dark, let it be dark. Not bitter, just--just straight, just seeing what was, saying all right. I opened my mouth and my eyes, and the clouds were thicker, but it was all right; I thought I could have unlocked my knees and my grip on the rail and just leaned back in the dark, and it would have held me up like seawater, clear and buoyant and moving and safe like that. I didn't try that. I sat down on the porch for a while, safe in the dark. I would have stayed longer, but I thought Lucy would start worrying over me if I didn't come in. Sure enough, she was in the entry. By the time I got through the door she was innocently straightening out the boot box, but she looked pink enough so I figured she'd been on her way out to get me.

"It's all right, Lucy," I told her.
"Sleep well. I plan to."

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. That's one thing that gets easier as I get older. But I don't sleep as deep as I used to. I woke up in the dark; the clock by my bed said 10:30 and there were voices coming from the porch.

"She'll be all right after all, I think."

"Lu, you know she isn't likely to get any better--the doctor said it's degenerative--I mean--"

"I didn't mean that. I mean she'll be all right with it."

John made the grunt he makes when he can't agree and doesn't want to disagree.

“She said so when she came in--said it was all right. And she looked--her eyes were all sort of dark and soft and--well, sure. I think something happened out on the porch.”

“Something?”

Lucy attempted a light laugh that didn't quite come off. “I thought I saw it, actually.”

“The unicorn.”

John laughed, soft and low. “Still in love, are you, Lu? With me, I hope?”

“I expect I might be. But it wasn't like that. It was all black, and it was with her.”

I thought then that Lucy seemed to think my hearing had gone along with my memory. I thought, waking up this morning--after I remembered where I was and what day it was and what had happened last night--that maybe she'd meant me to hear.

I don't think she necessarily expected me to remember. I don't expect myself to remember, not all the time. Whether or no, he'll be waiting for me in the dark.

The End

