

The Beasts

A spark exploded from the flickering campfire and landed on the green collar of Mr. Crane's shirt. The ash of it was promptly swept away by his wrinkled hand, forming a faint cloud of white dust to drift into the darkness of the night.

When he spoke, he addressed the children gathered around the fire with him. "Well," his voice wasn't much more than air escaping his body, "I was alive when you could count the number of stars in the sky. I'm a thousand years old, grandchildren." His wrinkled lips curled into a weak smile; his orange eyes creased around the edges. He was still staring at the curling flames. "Ask me, children. Ask me anything in the world, and I know it."

Joan, the oldest of the children, was the only one brave enough to speak. She blinked her tired eyes into focus and stood up proudly, holding her baby sister in her arms. "We want to hear about how you killed the beasts."

Mr. Crane smiled fully now, looking up from the blackening logs. "We never killed them. We *tamed* them."

"And, I don't believe you're a thousand years old."

Mr. Crane gave a slight chuckle. "Just hear my story, granddaughter.

"Well, to start, I'll admit I am an old, old man. Older than the forest here, and that's no metaphor. I saw them plant it, I did. Years after we got the beasts taken care of. I was young then. I had a full head of brown hair. Can you imagine?"

The children could not imagine.

"I was alive all the way back then. I was alive even in the time of the beasts."

The crowd murmured, and many young faces leaned closer into the firelight.

"Now, these beasts are not like the beasts of the woods, nor the beasts of nightmares. They are the beast of the *right here*, the beasts of

the *waking day*. They are beasts of metal and spinning gears. They came in many different types. You would have them around the house with you!”

The children laughed.

“There was one,” Mr. Crane began, “that eats clothes. It’s box-shaped and ugly. You open its mouth; you put the clothes in. It washes them for you.”

“That sounds nice,” said one of the children. “Washing in basins makes me cry.”

“Ah. But I haven’t told you in full: the washing-beast is *hungry*. Any beast is. They don’t eat potatoes. Not meat. Not even pasta. Those things are too simple.”

“What does it eat then?” asked another of the children.

“Oh, grandson, it eats the *earth*. We had some other treats for it, wind-food, water-food, sun-food. Those wouldn’t run out. But those treats came in small quantities, and with all the hungry beasts, that wouldn’t do. So we fed them the earth.

“Well, more and more beasts were being made. Different types. Even some beasts that could *think* and *write*. We fed those thinking-beasts very much. Soon, we realized that they would eat up all the earth if we did nothing about it. But it’s not just their eating that’s the problem. Their eating keeps them moving. When they move, they breathe out black and spit out brown. Into the sky, into the river. Have you ever seen a brown river? A black sky at daytime?”

The children had not.

“There was a brown river in my day. When I saw it, I knew the beasts had to go.”

“What did you do with them?” Joan asked.

“I started *talking* about it, I did. I asked people if they really needed the beasts around. I asked them if they like brown rivers and black skies at daytime, and told them that if they didn’t, they should do something to stop it. They should stop feeding the beasts.”

“What happened?” asked a young child.

“Some listened, some didn’t. Who could blame them? The rivers didn’t go brown all at once. Little by little, they did. Some people didn’t notice. Some people didn’t care.”

“Get to the point,” said Joan. “My baby sister will be too nervous to sleep until the beasts are handled with.”

Mr. Crane nodded. “Half the world was on one side, half on the other. Half liked the beasts, half wanted them gone. In the end, it all came down to *one* person to tip the scale. Once they joined our side, *more* than half of the world wanted the machines gone. And, when most people want one thing, the others might as well just follow along. You’ll learn that when you get older.

“Think about that!” Mr. Crane said. “*One* person. You could be that person! But you have to be brave. It always takes bravery to choose a side. To act on what you really believe in. You’ll learn that when you get older, too.”

“What did you do with them?” Joan repeated.

“We threw them into a pile,” Mr. Crane said. “We left them there. *Some* of the beasts, we kept. But we kept enough to tame each one, to feed each one with treats that wouldn’t run out. We chose beasts that wouldn’t make the rivers brown. We got rid of thinking-beasts altogether. Who needs a *rock* to think when a person can?”

“I see what you mean,” Joan whispered. “You tamed them.”

“Yes. We made new beasts, too. Who can name any?”

“Solar-powered e-bikes,” Joan said.

“I heard that the city-lights are alive,” said another child.

“They’re made of little glowing plants, not electricity.”

A log burst open, into a million sparks.

“And now, grandchildren, the pile of old, discarded beasts is overgrown with grass. There’s a tree on it now. I sat under it and read a book once. The ground was lumpy, grandchildren.”

“Thanks a lot,” one of the kids complained. “I sure *love* washing things in basins.”

Just then, a cloud slipped away from the sky, and a host of stars appeared in the night. The whole purple galaxy was there, twisting and twirling like ribbons in the wind. It was as if the world was split open, cracked like an egg.

Mr. Crane looked up to see this. “Now, I can count the number of hairs on my head. But never the amount of stars in the sky. Never can I quite match the colour of the river in my paintings. Not since we tamed the beasts.”

The last of the fire died away, and they sat there in the starlight.