

A tale from the
Worlds Across the Causeway

THE TALE OF THE BLACK DOG

Legends of The Witness

“So it is not strange that weird tales have sprung up concerning this mountain, tales that are told about the firesides in the few houses that dot the lonely roads.”

BEYOND the cities, at the edge of the northern wilderness, a mountain range stretches across the land bearing evidence of ancient volcanic action. Frozen pines and rocky crags cover the mountainsides, and deep gorges carved by time separate the various peaks.

The range’s Western Peak, though seemingly as plain as a pikestaff, is the topic of many a weird account. Though, by measurement, it may not soar as high as its neighbors, it makes a stronger impression than the rest.

On the mountain’s southern side, from which all approach, its slope is sheer. Jagged cliffs appear as fortifications, dissuading adventurers from an approach.

However if you trek through the valleys to its northeastern side, you will find a gradual, heavily-wooded incline that makes for pleasant hiking. If one didn’t know better, you wouldn’t imagine these areas were shared by the same mountain.

When summer bakes the land, the gray cliffs that rise and fall among the high-altitude forests stand out in striking detail. On windy days, when dust wisps into the air, it appears as if steam is rising from two objects consisting of radically different temperatures — the icy hand of the mountain against the valley’s warm embrace.

In winter, on the other hand, there is no illusion of climatical cohabitation. Storms often roar through the ravines, covering the mountainside in slick, white sheets. Once the blizzards pass, clefts of black rock stand out among the numbing snow to create an alluring menace that is

difficult to describe.

If you were to view the mountain on a map, it would simply be labeled “West” or “Western” Peak, but the locals have come to call it by a different name: The Witness.

It is a place that seems a world completely its own, unbound from tethers of time and space. So it is not strange that weird tales have sprung up concerning this mountain, tales that are told about the firesides in the few houses that dot the lonely roads — tales of portals to other realms, castles floating on clouds in the sky, and cloaked figures that wander the woods at night.

Among these legends, there is one that stands out — a rather innocuous tale of a black dog, reportedly spotted at times upon the mountainside and sometimes among the woods. Many have seen it once, a few twice, but none have ever told of a third meeting.

This tale is told in different words by different people, but the meaning is always the same. The words with which I have begun this narration are my own rendering of a common tradition. I am invoking myself as muse, so to speak.

As you continue on, dearest reader, take delight in the absurdity of my tale. Let it live and grow within your mind’s fantasies. But take heed! It may seem strange that I caution you of such a superstitious tale...but I do believe.

If you would wonder why, then read on to my story that follows.



First for Joy

“And if a person shall meet the Black Dog once, it shall be for joy...”

EARLY one spring, I visited The Witness for the first time. My studies in geology made the locale a place of particular interest for me. At the time, I knew very little about the legends of the mountain.

A close friend of mine, Mirren Bellingham (whom I'd known since childhood), had traveled to the area many times before, and brought back many a tall tale. It was she who'd brought the region's ancient volcanic action to my attention.

For many years prior, The Witness had been such a place of joy for Mirren that she returned for near-yearly visits. She always invited me to join her, but I'd always refused — a rather embarrassing character flaw on my part: being afraid to see new things in person rather than imagine them through books.

Eventually, the invitation (and inevitable rejection) became something of a friendly ritual between us. Every year, she would ask me if I cared to join her, and every year I told her that I cared not to; it always produced a jovial exchange afterwards (one at which we became quite creative).

Then, one year, the invitations stopped. I knew, of course, this was because of “the incident” (which I will discuss further along in this tale).

I found it strange imagining myself trekking to The Witness without Mirren. I'd considered asking her to join me, for old time's sake, but I was unsure how she would receive such an invitation — would it be as jovial as it always had been, or would it twist into something darker,

something I did not intend? Perhaps I was overthinking things.

Regardless, to spare dredging up old wounds, I decided to come to the northern wilderness alone. I had my own reasons for being here.



As a home base for my excursion I made my way to the small town of Grebewater, located immediately south of the entrance to the Hanging Valley (which leads to The Witness). There, I booked a room at a well-established Inn called *The Lonely Spirit*.

A spacious, yet cozy, lobby greeted me upon entry. Three of the lobby walls featured impressive fireplaces, each with a collection of plush, leather furniture meant to cultivate company and conversation. A pity there were very few travelers present during my stay.

As for the front desk, calling it that would be deceptive. Aside from checking in or out, it also operated as a full-service bar, including a modest food menu!

I knew *The Spirit* was highly regarded, though I did not expect it to have such an enthralling appeal. Contrary to its name, this was a place people came to be anything but lonely.

I ordered an old fashioned at the bar and, listening to the crackles of fire, sipped in peace before turning in for the night.



I arose the next morning at daybreak and set out from the Inn just as the sun began to peak through the lowest point in the Hanging Valley.

Guiding myself by the maps I'd brought with me, I set out on a winding road that ran for about two miles in a northwesterly direction: toward The Witness.

A mile and a half in, the road turned sharply north into a deep ravine, known as the Goat's Teeth, that lay between The Witness in the west and Pike Mountain, as it is called, in the east.

I reached a seldom-used road at the farther end of the ravine that cut back southwest. Here, at The Witness' northeastern edge, I found the slope a much easier place from which to begin my ascent. Onward I tramped, the soft munching of forest-stuff beneath my boots, into a wood of green-leafed, quaking aspens.

After another half-hour of hiking through the foothills, I emerged upon a glade, and here I stopped for a brief rest. As if on cue, a gentle wind brushed through the trees. I closed my eyes and took a deep inhale. To me, at that moment in time, this place seemed liked the most normal and tranquil place in the world.



Before heading farther into the woods I took notice of a patch of vesicular texture protruding in the area between meadow and forest, and so went to investigate.

It was a beautiful specimen! I made particular note of the amygdules present throughout the rock that I believed might contain secondary minerals.

I had been at work for several minutes extracting a promising sample, when I noticed a dog trotting across the glade. It was then I realized I'd not seen nor heard any wildlife since I'd entered the Goat's Teeth. To find a dog, of all creatures, in this place was peculiar, I thought. I believed he must have belonged to someone and become lost, but closer examination disproved this theory; he was most certainly a wild dog, though one with a kind demeanor.

I suppose one could have called the dog black, but it was more a black that seems true only in the shadows, revealing itself instead to be a collection of warm browns when exposed to natural

light.

His breed was unclear, but he seemed proud — confident from whence he came, so to speak. As I prepared to trek farther up the mountain he insisted on following. I allowed it for the sake of the good company I'd found lacking at *The Spirit*.

Despite his insistence on tagging along, he didn't let this impede his own investigations. No, there was not a brook in which the dog did not wade, not a patch of brush he would not ramble through, and not a hole in which he would not poke his nose.

A jovial duo we made, a scraggly dog and a person whose appearance I'm sure didn't fair much better.

I took a great liking him. You see, I had recently lost my brother, the last remaining member of my family, and of late had found myself wading through the darkest thoughts. I admit my brother's passing likely had something to do with my decision to journey out to this desolate country — something with which to distract myself.

That black dog, in some way...for some reason, brought me a feeling I hadn't felt since the last night spent beside my brother's bed: he felt like family.



As we neared the apex of my planned ascent, my attention had fully shifted away from the time-hardened lava-sheets toward the curious dog. For a wild dog, he exhibited the strangest behavior.

For one, he was so quiet! Not once did I hear him bark, even when a coyote among the woods coaxed him to fight. And he was so light of foot! Even at the higher altitudes, where grass was sparse and the ground dry as bone, I never once saw a puff of dust rise from his feet as he

trotted along ahead of me.

At day's end, we returned down the same path we'd used to ascend. Sun hanging low in the sky, we arrived at the glade where we'd first met that morning. The setting sun bathed the clearing in an orange glow, and I felt as though everything were right in the world.

Walking into the glade, the notion that I likely had a furry friend coming home with me began to take root. Mulling through names in my head, I tromped to the clearing's center before I noticed the dog was no longer beside me.

I turned and spotted him at glade's edge. The shadows of the aspens obscured many of his features, and now he truly appeared to be black.

He looked at me with knowing eyes, and an amount of time passed that I cannot recount nor describe. After this, he quietly vanished into the woods.



Back at *The Lonely Spirit*, I sat before an open fire (for the evenings were still cool enough to make fire a near-necessity) and thought upon the day's journey. The shift from musky university halls to the fresh air of the mountains alone was enough to pay for the trouble of hiking the ancient pathways.

The long trek through that region, awash with the beauty of spring, appealed to the wildness inside me. I am supposed to be a civilized individual, but it seems there is a great deal of that dog in me for all that, a fact I only just then realized had made me enjoy that day all the more.

Many times since, when I have been fatigued or discouraged, I have thought back to this spring hike and felt the mountain breeze on my face, heard the trembling aspen leaves, and seen the dog trotting beside me, looking up and meeting his eyes with mine. And within this memory,

I can imagine my brother walking beside me as well.

It is a curious notion how often the smallest things leave the greatest memories behind.



Second for Sorrow

“...and if twice, it shall be for sorrow...”

THINKING back, I’m not sure what possessed us to do it.

It must have been that joyful spring visit to the The Witness that gave me a desire to see the mountains wreathed in snow. And more importantly, to see them with a close friend...

In the first week of February, just under three years after my first visit, Mirren and I found ourselves sitting before a fire inside *The Lonely Spirit*.

As I mentioned before, Mirren had been to The Witness many times and had climbed it in all seasons. She liked to refer to herself as a “part-time adventurer,” and I quite liked that (though I knew she sold herself short). Creativity flowed in her family’s veins.

The fire burned, and Mirren recounted to me how she had also seen a black dog upon the mountain. This was the first time I heard the Tale of the Black Dog.



Mirren visited The Witness early in the spring of her twentieth year, nine months after the passing of her grandmother. She described a similar trek to mine: cutting through the Goat’s Teeth and ascending via The Witness’s northeastern slope.

Whereas I had been fixated on the mountain’s lava-sheets, Mirren had had a singular mission: to reach Scrivener’s Point.

Scrivener’s Point is a beautiful outcropping on The Witness’ westerly face. There the view is breathtaking (so they say, I’ve never been) and from this perch a person can look out over the

wild forests for miles. Divine inspiration is said to strike anyone who makes the journey to this overlook.

However Mirren's goal had not been to seek out a creative epiphany. When she mentioned the name Freya Galloway, I knew immediately what her aim had been.



To most, Freya Galloway embodied the very spirit of adventure — some would have even called her its goddess. Ms. Galloway wrote for a living, and she was good at it too. Her books sold by the hundreds of thousands worldwide.

She never wrote a story about a place without first having traveled there. This lent an unparalleled authenticity to her stories, a trait that fans would come to adore about her work.

While the world may have viewed her as a superhuman storyteller, to Mirren, Freya Galloway was simply a grandmother.

Mirren had not known her parents (a story for another time) and Ms. Galloway had raised her from an early age. The young girl had wanted nothing more than to travel the world with her grandmother, alas the fates never aligned. By the time Mirren grew old enough to travel, Ms. Galloway's adventuring days were all but done.

While the pair may not have been able to travel the world in person, they *were* able to journey together via Freya's specialty: stories.

Freya told Mirren of many details she'd never put into any of her books — “too weird for the masses,” she'd told her granddaughter. And no story captivated Mirren more than her grandmother's journey to Scrivener's Point — the place where inspiration struck and the moment her career truly began.



Following details from her grandmother's story, Mirren trekked along a treacherous path, carved by time and cataclysm, around the mountain's northern face. She knew the path was dangerous, her grandmother had warned her as much, but Mirren pressed forward with blind determination.

She climbed and climbed until she neared the end of her quest. As she rounded a cleft on The Witness' western side, she saw Scrivener's Point in the distance. Her imagination fluttered in anticipation of the beauty that awaited her, though as her mind wandered, so too did her footing. On her next step, a sheet of unstable slate gave way and Mirren fell — or rather she began to fall, but stopped.

Mirren thought she'd begun to levitate (adrenaline can do that to you). She stared down to the crags below and imagined the fate that awaited her.

This wouldn't be such a bad way to go, she thought.

She then realized something tugged at her, and a strength yanked her back onto the rocky path. Laying on her side, with hand raised to shield her eyes from the sun, she looked up into the friendly face of a black dog. He twice licked her cheek and then patiently waited for her to rise.

Undeterred, but now paying extra attention to her footing, Mirren pressed on... and the dog followed. After a half-hour more of shimmying and tip-toeing, the pair made it to Scrivener's Point.

The view overlooked vast forests and winding tributaries that flowed out from The Witness into the wilds beyond. For Mirren the most memorable thing was not the view nor the feeling of creative inspiration that rose up within her, but instead the presence of the black dog sitting next

to her, his bushy tail sweeping back and forth.

And then Mirren told me something she hadn't told anyone — sitting there next to that dog felt like sitting next to her grandmother. There, in that moment, she somehow felt as though she'd recaptured a memory that never was: sitting upon Scrivener's Point with Freya Galloway at the place where her inspiration had blossomed...the place that had made her what the world would come to know.

At that, I thought she'd finished her story, so I told Mirren of the similarities between her meeting with the dog and mine. She patiently listened as I recounted my tale, and when I'd finished she asked me if I'd seen the black dog a second time. I hadn't... but she had.



Several years had passed since Mirren's journey to Scrivener's Point, and she'd climbed The Witness many times in that duration. As a result, she garnered quite a reputation throughout her twenties. She hadn't become a famous author like her grandmother, but she had followed in her footsteps as an intrepid adventurer. Being the heir apparent to the famous Freya Galloway was enough to place her in high-esteem among those looking for expertise and a dash of star-power.

The January of her twenty-seventh year, a group of thrill-seekers sought out Mirren to guide them up The Witness at a time when most advised against it. Undeterred by naysayers, Mirren accepted (she was never one to back away from a challenge).

Early one frigid morning, Mirren led the party to The Witness's northeastern slope. Snowfall had blanketed the area the past two days, which delayed the group's departure. But this day was bright (even if it was cold), without a cloud in the sky, so Mirren lost no time in advising the party take advantage of the fortuitous shift in weather.

The group didn't have any particular goal in mind; they simply wanted to carry back a story of the time they climbed the famed Witness with an almost-equally-famed guide at their side. It all seemed a play for status and bragging rights rather than for any true sense of enjoyment, but Mirren was not a person to pass judgement on their reasons — they paid just the same.

Rough and rowdy, the party trudged through snow-laden crags. They were an unsavory lot, but Mirren mostly ignored them.

Even though she'd become exceptionally experienced at traversing The Witness, she never forgot the lesson she'd learned on her first trek — when the black dog had save her life.

As they approached a treacherous stretch that curled around a steep crag, Mirren warned the party of a narrow ledge they would need to shimmy across in order to reach their intended destination. There would be plenty of room for each to (mostly) walk in single-file, but they all needed to be alert and quiet so as to avoid encouraging an avalanche. The party acquiesced and they began their crossing, Mirren in the lead.

Halfway across, a large rock jutted outward over the path, obscuring the view to the other side. Mirren signaled back to the group signifying the potential hazard, which they acknowledged.

Carefully, she edged around the outcropping, keeping her head down so as to not lose her footing. When she made it to the other side, satisfied there was solid ground beneath her, she looked up...and witnessed a familiar face.

In front of her, roughly ten yards ahead where the narrow path opened onto a wider clearing, stood a black dog, stoic and alert. He remained silent and motionless. Only his steaming breath disturbed the air. All of a sudden Mirren realized the sky had become overcast. And then the

blizzard hit.

A ferocious gust came out of nowhere and almost lifted Mirren from the mountain, but luckily she grasped a sturdy root protruding from the cliffside. She looked up — awe and terror engulfed her as a white maelstrom tore down the mountain.

Mirren called out as loud as she could to the group behind, warning them of the avalanche, but in the blustering wind she didn't know if anyone heard her.

The last thing she saw before the world turned white was the knowing gaze of the black dog standing vigil at the path's end.



Only Mirren survived “the incident.” She had never been so near to death like that, and became understandably shaken for some time afterward. Her adventuring days were over.

Beside a raging fire (much like the one she and I sat in front of as these stories were recounted to me) a cloaked stranger had approached her.

She doesn't remember how the topic of the black dog came up, but when it did she described the stranger's face draining pale.

He said, “have you not heard the Tale of the Black Dog?”

Mirren had shook her head.

And so the man told her, “About the mountain that bears eternal witness lives a black dog. This dog is known by two signs: people have seen it bark, but have heard no sound, and where it walks it leaves no footprint behind, whether in the dust of summer or the snow of winter. And if a person shall meet the Black Dog once it shall be for joy; and if twice, it shall be for sorrow — and the third time they shall die.”



I sat there in silence, processing the multitude of stories I'd just heard. After a moment, and a few sips of my old fashioned, I told Mirren that perhaps we shouldn't climb The Witness the following day.

I asked her if she thought the men in that traveling party that hired her had seen the black dog twice before, and that "the incident" was the third time for all of them.

Unexpectedly, Mirren's mood brightened, and she simply laughed as she patted me on the shoulder. She said that was merely bad planning, bad preparedness, and a dash of bad luck. When I pressed her about the Tale of the Black Dog, she dismissed the legend, calling it a ghost tale. After all, she only believed in such tales if they were lucky ones.

I feigned a smile and finished my drink.



Third for Death

“...and the third time, they shall die.”

THE next morning was clear and very cold. The air felt like tiny needles on my cheeks. Mirren and I walked side-by-side through the Hanging Valley. Everything was so quiet. It had been snowing heavily the day prior, and so made for labored walking. We did not reach the base of The Witness until almost eleven o'clock.

Instead of trekking to the farther trail, through the Goat's Teeth, where the woods were choked in foot-deep snow, we instead began our climb on the southern side amongst the craggy fortifications. Here the mountain was much steeper, but free of large snow mounds and dotted by rock slabs that provided good footholds.

We climbed and climbed until we reached reprieve at a small plateau. Mirren beckoned toward a fissure in the cliffs ahead. We squeezed through the sequence of clefts, and emerged at a gorgeous overlook. I looked over at my friend and we exchanged a pair of grins before pressing on.

For the better half of the afternoon we made slow, but steady, progress across the narrow ledges and cliffs of The Witness' southerly face.



Mirren led, I following the best I could, when suddenly she stopped and pointed without a word. I followed her finger to the top of a crag ahead. There, high above, stood a black dog much like the one I'd seen three years prior.

This one, though, appeared obsidian black against the snow. Steaming breath rose from his jaws, but no sound disturbed the air. Once, and only once, he gazed down on us with knowing eyes, then turned and strode out of sight.

I looked at Mirren. Her face turned pale as the snow underfoot, and she braced herself against the cliff face. Without a quaver in her voice — resolute, accepting — she said, “I did not believe it before. I believe it now. This is the third time.”

She mumbled something else to herself, looking off in the direction of Scrivener’s Point, and even as she spoke, the slab of rock on which she stood gave way.

A clatter of rocks and a moment later, I stood alone.



Later that evening I stood beside what was left of my friend. Tears froze on my cheeks. The setting sun touched only the highest of rocks, and I knew that I must leave lest I share in her final sleep. I said my farewells, then staggered on back towards town.



The day after Mirren died, I commissioned a search party to find her body. They found her where I’d left her. Beside the body, they told me, a black dog stood vigil. As the party approached, the dog had bounded swiftly back into the shadows of the lonely ravine.

I know that at some time I will see him again, for the third and final time. I believe the tale of the Black Dog. Can you wonder that I do, having heard my story?

I am afraid. It may be years before my time comes, but I feel it like hot breath on the nape of my neck: the relentless presence of death.

Though my fear is unmistakable, I also find my curiosity grows by the day about this mysterious creature, this “black dog.” Is he nothing more than a mutt who’s learned to scrape a living together on that desolate landscape, or is he something else entirely?

Those knowing eyes of his, they are not malicious eyes. Something tells me that dog carries a part of myself, and possibly that I carry a part of it. Time will tell. Perhaps our third meeting is drawing near. Third for death.

Do you know what death feels like? No, not what it feels like to die, what the *presence* of death feels like. Perhaps you’ve already recognized it within the pages of this story.

Death takes many forms, and can feel many different ways, but there is always a presence to it, something tangible, an alluring menace that is difficult to describe. If you ever find yourself in the unfortunate position to be near death’s presence, I would encourage you to stop and listen. Everyone’s afraid of death (those who aren’t are liars), but that doesn’t mean its presence should be universally feared.

Maybe you know what I’m talking about. Maybe you don’t. When I am gone, I hope this tale may be of some interest to those who remain.

Caution, dearest reader, is a moral of this story, but I hope it’s not the only thing you walk away with. More than caution, I hope this tale lights the fire of courage in you, like the homely fires you may one day sit beside in *The Lonely Spirit*.

I miss my friend, my Mirren, deeply. But what I regret most is not that fateful day that claimed her life, but all the days prior that I squandered... all the days I could have been living life to the fullest.

You might assume I curse the black dog for ever crossing paths with me, but you would be

mistaken. That dog understood something about me, about Mirren too for that matter, and gifted us connections to a presence I will treasure for the rest of my days.

And who knows? Maybe I'll meet the black dog for a fourth time after my third. Will it be for adventure? Or rebirth? Or love? I look forward to comparing notes with Mirren.

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