

The Shores

By Michael Nouwen

There lived a man of well standing in a castle that stood on the hill that for generations had dictated the scenery of the land. The man was well respected about the town that had popped up at the foot of the hill. The respect the man had was due to his family's sharing of the wealth with the town's people. This had made the town into one of the most prosperous areas of the land. But the man was unlike his father and his ancestors before him. He did not feel the need to share the riches of the castle with other less fortunate families. When the man reached his twenties he took his father's place as head of the family after his father's death. The man was not only unlike his father in character but also in ruling his land. The man introduced taxes for the villagers who lived inside the castle grounds and for those who used the castle's well. The man self proclaimed him Lord of the Hill at title never worn by any of his predecessors. The man went about the town in gold threaded clothes while the population of the town grew ever poorer. The town's people grew weary of the man's presence and grew poor from his ever increasing and multiplying taxes, their indulgence of the man's tyrannical reign grew ever thinner until they started breaking down the buildings which were located on castle grounds. The old tavern, which was built by the man's venerable grandfather next to the castle gates was broken down and built up on the other side of town. The man saw the town creeping from the lands of the hillside when standing in the lofty towers he had built in addition to the ancient castle to view over what he found to be his domain. He spied upon all villagers if they were not surreptitiously contriving plans to pry the treasure from his grasp.

The man grew more and more reclusive as time passed and as the village was ever moving away from the castle the man no longer occupied himself with being frightful about the activities of his neighbours. He went down into the vaults and cellars of his large castle for days at end. There he hoarded his treasures not unlike the dragons in the stories the town's people told their children. Many fine things were to be found at the man's sanctuary, richly woven tapestries hung from the walls, priceless golden chalices which had only been used to serve fine wines or ales to for himself since the start of the man's reign, silver cutlery that never played a part in a grand banquet in his day, silver coins and golden ducats, suits of armour inlaid with gems made by the craftiest smiths, arrows with silver tips, swords with golden handles, all the priceless artefacts his ancestors wore to the ancient wars he kept all to himself and would not allow even the servants to polish his precious belongings. In the countless hours he spend down in his self-made heaven he drank fine wines from the chalices and dines the best foods from the plates, while letting the golden ducats fall almost sensuously through his fingers. He did not even share a crumb of bread of his copious meals with the servants who still serviced his every whim. In time he started worrying the servants might be after his valuables he was sure he saw the cook glaring at the diamantes and opals that lay on top of the silver coins. The guards were always admiring the weaponry in his halls, caressing the magnificent arrows and handling the sublime swords, they desired them too much and was fearing they might sneak up on him at night and cut his throat to rob him. He feared that the lot of them would prove to be too untrustworthy and he dismissed them all saying: "I have no need of snivelling, sycophantic servants who secretly desire my wealth, be gone from my doorstep and do not return!". After that there were only two people living in the castle, the man and his old mother. It was around this time the plague ravaged the countryside and cities of all lands and eventually it came to the lands of the castle and the now far away village. The man's mother still went about the town in the pious fashion of her family sharing knowledge and what little valuable items she could take from castle that had eluded her son's attention, she paid dearly for her kindness however when she took ill with the plague virus. When the man's mother asked for medical aid the man replied: "Ah dear mother you have led a long and meaningful life, why would we send for the quack from the greedy village with his expensive potions? You should be happy with that which has been given to you!". During the night his mother

died and the man lived alone and never ventured away from the vaults that kept his treasure from that moment on. Word spread quickly through the village about the man's harsh words against his mother on her deathbed and soon the villagers would not even linger in the shadow of the castle and the hill out of fear of the man.

Then many years after the death of the man's mother his kinsman from the North came to pay a visit with joyous news. After many long years he and his wife had conceived a child. A son to carry on his name and his legacy. It was a long standing tradition in their family to present the lucky father with the baby's weight once in gold and once in silver. But the man did not honour his family's ways and send his kinsman away without so much as a refill of his canteen or food for the way. He stood in his castle gates and faced daylight for the first time in years dressed in his ancestor's armour wielding his father's sword shouting: "Why should I reward you if you choose to procreate with womenfolk! It is no business of mine!". That was the last time the man had words with anyone and he kept to himself and his gold and as time slowly progressed the man was pleased with his hermit existence.

When sixty years had passed since the visit of his kinsman the man was growing curious about his long days in life. He lived clean enough without tobacco and since the dismissal of his servants he had not drunk wine nor ale but now his hundred and fifth year had passed. Yet he did not wander outside the castle walls but sat in his halls anxiously awaiting the cold fingers of death to take hold of his heart. But death did not come for the man. As years turned to decades and the decades turned to a century the man had long realised that he was not destined for a normal end of his days. He was pleased at the possibility of spending so much more time with his gold and silver than any other man would have been given. In the height of his decadence he thought it a gift bestowed upon him.

It proved to be a thought born out of impertinence because after another hundred and seventy-five years when the man's four hundred and eightieth year on earth had passed food would no longer satisfy his hunger and drink would not inebriate and dull his senses. Oh he hungered alright and the thirst he had was unquenchable. For he now hungered and thirsted for love and companionship, the warm touch of a friendly hand or the kind word of a friend from his childhood. He started hating himself more than he ever had hated anything before in his overlong life. He spend his days in the castle while self-loathing consumed his mind. But it was not the end of his suffering. Eventually everything that comes from the earth goes back to it, such is the way of the world, the passing centuries made the castle walls crumble into ruins, towers fell and armour and weapons rusted into the ground. The splendour of the once great castle and the once even greater family had been reduced to the nothingness of forgotten history.

When the man ascended from the rubble and dust that were now in place of everything he once cared about he saw that the village had grown exponentially but he did not venture there, the world he had known had disappeared completely, steam rose from the village but the man saw nor smelled fire and he was abashed by the strange materials and artificial lights he saw. He ran for the forest he had played in as a child only to find a barren wasteland of stumps and broken twigs. As a final resolution the man turned to the sea although he had never seen the sea before he somehow knew that it was the only place left for him to go. There he now ever wanders at the shores of the sea eternally lonely. The eyes of mortal men sometimes still encounter him when he walks on their peaceful shores and they fear his empty perilous glare and they believe that whoever meets the eyes of the man of the sea is filled with despair for the rest of their days. However men have learned to avoid his presence and the dire consequences this entails. Unable to live, unable to die, unable to quench the hungers he did not chase in life and so the man is doomed to walk the shores of the world alone until the end of the days of the sun.

As the final sun set on the last shore of the world the man closed his eyes. No tale tells of the man's fate as the world went over the edge and darkness fell over the ruined castle and the hill.