

# **The Memory**

By Nick Hayden

It was a memory more precious than any other she had. It was worn and faded, frayed at the edges, but even extensive viewing had not distorted it. It had never had the feel of a memory, but of something else more elusive, something akin to a snatch of a dream or a scene from a book read in childhood.

Her memory was of lights and warmth and insubstantial shapes. It had no particulars, nothing real, but only shadows of some reality, and brilliant lights, glowing like the sky on these cold, lonely nights. And warmth like a blanket, a fire, sleep on a dark morning when nothing is awake except the frigid wind.

The owner of this memory was sometimes less sure of her own name than the reality of the memory. This frightened her. For if the memory was false, could she depend on her own existence? But she did not think on such things. She contemplated the memory, examining it endlessly, hoping to extract some clue or revelation from it. There was nothing. She gained nothing from it except a desire to continue forward.

She trudged through the snow, leaving only transient footsteps, small and unremarkable on the white expanse. The wind covered the footsteps, and when she turned back, they were gone.

She was never quite sure how she had arrived at this particular place at this particular moment. She could remember incidents, of course — a table with warm food; a tree behind her back as she watched the falling snow; bitter wind gnawing at her cheeks, her hands; snow melting around her toes; sunrises and sunsets; aching legs, bloodshot eyes; fires so warm she never wanted to leave; leaving; a horizon in the distance that never neared.

But now it was night. Half her life was night. Snowflakes drifted down like bits of clouds. The wind had fallen asleep, buried beneath feet of snow and ice. It

would rise again tomorrow, colder than ever. The land spread before her without distinction, and the blankness shone with light.

Stars peered from the sky, each one crisp and clear, a point so bright and precise that it must be newly born. Each was pure, unsullied, like the snow beneath her feet — and distant. The snow sparkled like the stars, but that was because it was the stuff of stars. Fallen stars.

She stopped, though she knew she should not. If she stopped, she might never begin again. She stood still, bundled thickly against the cold. Her true form was hid by those things necessary for survival in this harsh world. She uncovered her face and took a deep, burning breath.

Her eyes were a light blue, the shade of snow at gray dawns. Spots of red appeared on her cheeks, at the tip of her nose. She pulled off her gloves and placed her pale hands against her cheeks. The warmth felt good, comforting, even if it was her own, even if she could never win this battle against the chill herself.

She realized again how empty the night was. She turned, looking about her anxiously, but no one was there. She hoped, somehow and always, that someone would come and carry her away, so she could stop trudging, so that his body might warm her.

She slipped her gloves on and raised her head to the sky. That was the real reason she had stopped. Not to look for things she would not find — though even that had some part in it, she admitted to herself — but to look at what she knew she would find.

Greens and reds and blues and golds lapped slowly against stars like ocean waves, a pool of rainbows in the distant sky, near the horizon. Waves spread from the center slowly, slowly outward, and crashed against the blackness of night. It was a mesmerizing sight and inexplicable. Frightening.

She didn't know why, but whenever she watched the lights above, her heart beat faster and her hands began to sweat. She could not look for long. She wanted

to turn away and run. She felt small, a single flake among the winter of the world; she would melt if she looked too long.

But she always looked. The colors were strange, celestial, too bright and too slow. Nothing in the world equaled them. When there was no moon, the snow mirrored the colors in pale reflections, and she could watch these for hours. It was distilled; she could almost grasp it when it sparkled in the snow. Above, the sight was terrible. Below, shielded by the vast distances of sky, it was beautiful.

Her eyes snapped to the ground. She stood for a long time staring at the snow. Her limbs grew cold. She could no longer feel her face. Slowly, as if waking, she covered her face and took a step.

After one step, the others came as a matter of course.

One day she found herself in a village of lumpy white buildings. The buildings had been spotless wooden boxes once, but snow covered everything eventually. The villagers tired of clearing it away. They let it remain wherever it did not directly interfere.

She entered the inn. There were few enough travelers wherever she went, but every village had an inn. The guest rooms were an excuse for a common room; the villagers needed somewhere to gather, somewhere with a fire to warm them and company to enjoy the warmth with them.

She pulled a chair near the fire and sat. Slowly, one article at a time, she removed her protective clothing. First came the mask, then the gloves, then the boots. The hood, the scarf, the outer coat, the outer pants, the inner coat. She let her hair down and shook her head violently to untangle it. Snow and ice flew from her. A puddle formed on the floor.

She could feel warm air, as she seldom could. She felt it in her throat when she inhaled. There was a draft somewhere, but she loved it; it made the warmth sweeter, fiercer.

"One of life's great pleasures."

She turned her head to find a man looking at her from a nearby table. He had a thick beard and dark eyes. He had neither food nor drink at his table, nothing to show why he sat there. She thought that perhaps he liked the fire as she did.

She nodded in reply to his statement and turned back to watch the flames.

He spoke again soon after, in a tone of understanding. "You heading to the Top of the World?"

She watched the flames, the strange dance of a force that had no real substance but moved in ways she thought she should understand. Like music, just as formless and just as powerful.

"I guess that's where I'm heading," she answered. "Unless something changes." She glanced at him. "How did you know?"

"You're not the only one going that way."

She chewed her upper lip. She had not known that there were others, but it did not surprise her. It seemed natural. "What's there? Do you know?"

He chuckled. "If I knew, I probably wouldn't go. It's the mystery that intrigues me. Oh, sure, there are those who go simply to prove there's nothing there and those who go because they see everyone else going and those who go because it's their 'destiny,' but in the end, does it really matter why we go? It's a challenge to get there, so it must be worth doing. It's a matter of pride."

She did not say anything immediately. She did not say that it was her destiny, because she would never have used that word, but that was the idea of it. She thought of it as her fulfillment when she could think of it in words at all. What she said was: "I've never met anyone else. Why doesn't everyone want to go?"

He leaned forward. "What is it like traveling?"

"Cold, so cold you want to give in to it. Cold and lonely. Miserable...." She was going to add *beautiful* and *necessary, joyful* and *rich in expectation, silent* — sometimes in terror and sometimes in peace — but he did not want to hear such things. He had heard what he had asked for.

"Exactly. Most people can't handle it. They give up and settle down. Which is good, because then you and I get to rest and sit by their fire."

She nodded again. He said nothing else, and she watched the fire and its undulating, restless motions. Snow sparkled, but fire blazed. It was a tamed star, a boxed dream, but still, for all she tried, she could not understand it.

The man at the inn was right. The further she traveled, the more travelers she saw on the path. She still traveled alone, but she sometimes saw others in the distance, trudging along. Sometimes there were two or three together, but they never seemed to move quickly. She saw them arguing with one another many times.

The Top of the World, for its self-evident locality, was not easy to find.

In the Last Village — a sign proudly proclaimed the name because "last" gave the village a distinction over every other collection of houses in the world — she first experienced despair. There were men there who said that no one could reach the Top of the World, that they had tried and failed, that better men than they had tried and failed — that all who tried had failed.

"You don't know that!"

"No one like *me* has ever tried."

"You're lying. You don't want us to reach the Top. You're too scared to try yourself."

"I've traveled for thirty years. Nothing's stopping me."

She listened to the protests, to the confidence of the voices, but inside she felt a hole. It was trying to consume her memory, the only memory she believed was intrinsically hers, and when she grasped for it, it slipped from her fingers, heavy, bulky, shapeless. She remained silent in a room full of words and contemplated, for the first time, failure.

The Last Village was many days from the Top of the World, and these days were much colder than any that had come before. It snowed fiercely, and no

matter how securely she dressed, snow forced its way into cracks and cold wind slithered through layers of clothes to bite the skin. She could see neither sun nor star. Day was a gray version of night.

She saw no one as she walked unceasingly forward. She could not see her path, but she knew she was following it. She thought it was the right path. She hoped it was. She had no way to tell. She could only continue forward the way she had chosen before the snow had overtaken her vision.

The cold — unbearable if she stopped — affected her memory. Its lights seemed dimmer, its warmth cooler, and she began to doubt that she had ever possessed such a memory. It must be an illusion, a foolish dream, a tale she had heard once upon a time. She dare not stop, for she would die.

She considered turning back. She could see nothing ahead. No one had ever made it to the Top of the World. She knew that. There was fire in the Last Village, a room and a bed.

She continued forward. She longed for the past, but her feet were moving for reasons she could no longer remember; she feared to stop them now.

The snow ceased.

She passed through the snow as through a final barrier. Behind her, it blew with the intensity of a cyclone, but here the air was still. She found herself in a circle of calm and her feet were on a rising slope. She was very near the Top. She climbed the last few steps and found herself on a plateau.

She looked up. The sky held neither the black of night nor the gray-blue of day. The ocean of colors floated above her. It consumed the whole sky. The colors felt closer than they ever had, but she knew she could never reach them. Miles of bitter air separated her.

It was unearthly cold. Flakes of ice dropped from her breath.

Her eyes caught something she had never seen, a ribbon of gold that stretched from the center of the colors down ... down ... down.... Her eyes followed the

ribbon, followed it down miles and ages of emptiness until it reached the ground. There, in the center of the plateau, stood a ladder.

She rushed toward it with energy she did not have. She stumbled through the dusty snow, pushing through weak knees and a twisted ankle. The ladder was within her reach when she first noticed she was not alone.

It was a man. He gripped a rung in gloved hands; his feet were still on the ground. She could not see his face through his mask. No skin was visible except for the circle of his eyes, but she sensed that every muscle was tensed, that his flesh was taut in strain.

She watched him and time passed. He did not move. He never ascended a single rung. He stood there in silent agony.

Then he threw himself suddenly away from the ladder and landed on his back in a puff of snow and with a thud. She expected silence, as if he were dead, but there was not silence, only the sound of weeping. She knelt beside him, unable to give words to any of her questions or emotions.

"It's impossible," he muttered. Not to her, not to anyone, but to himself. His tears froze to his face in small pellets. "I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!" This last was a scream; it reverberated across the plateau and echoed in diminishing parodies of his anger.

"Why didn't you go up?"

"The one who came before me said it couldn't be done. Said he had tried everything." The man was raving, but she listened. "He said he had been here for days. Said the ones before him told him the same he was telling me. Said ... didn't matter what he said. I didn't listen, did I? I woke one morning and found him dead. Killed himself. Couldn't bear the failure. I had to bury him. That was yesterday ... I think it was yesterday. All the days are the same. All are just today. I'll never get there. Never. Never."

She crawled away from the man cautiously, but her eyes remained on him. The words clung to the despair she had been hiding from herself. Her back touched

something solid ... and warm. She turned and found the ladder. It shone softly in the light, but always its own color, reflecting none of the colors above.

She leaned heavily against it. The warmth seeped through her many layers to the skin. It was fiercely pleasant. The cold gnawed at her skin, even beneath her clothes, and this warmth threatened to consume her. The two struggled within her. Her limbs felt heavy and weary. Her insides churned. Her mind was a mass of indecision concerning a question she did not know.

Within a few minutes, she was asleep.

Her hands gripped the rung and she pulled. Her hands burned. She gritted her teeth in pain and exertion. Her muscles trembled. She could not pull herself up; she was too heavy. She felt she had to pull the ground beneath her feet as well — the ground here and everywhere; the whole world must come up the ladder with her, but she could not carry it. Her shoulders were too narrow, her frame too small.

She tried to jump up the ladder. If she could get her feet off the ground, if she could support herself on the ladder alone.... But the ladder was too slick. Her feet slid from the rungs and her hands could not hold her. The gold color was from the oil, she thought. The ladder had been anointed so that none could scale it.

She studied the ladder. She knew it was useless. The ladder went on forever. There was no end to it, none that any human could reach. Her memory — she must have been thrown down, like the snow, to be blown about, buried under layers of others like her, unique, yet indistinguishable.

She stood before the ladder, an arm's length away, and began to remove her protective clothing, piece by piece. She could barely make her hands unfasten and



unbutton the other articles. She would warm them on the ladder, then continue briefly. It took a long time. She continued removing clothing after the outer, protective pieces.

She had never been so cold. Since birth, she had never been naked in the cold.

She clung to the ladder. She knew she could not climb it even now. She was still too heavy. She tried to will her arms to pull, her legs to push, but they would not respond; they listened instead to a deeper will, one that had surrendered but refused to despair.

She was alone and only the warmth of the ladder spreading throughout her body kept her alive. She tumbled into uneasy dreams from time to time.

Then she looked up the length of the ladder, and the rungs ran together like a walkway of gold. The ripples in the sky above opened like doors. She trembled and averted her eyes. "My name...", she whispered, trying to remember what it was. "My name is Falle. I have searched my whole life for a memory I never knew. I've wanted to forget it. I've wanted to take pleasure in the things I saw others enjoying. I've wanted the answer to come quickly and easily. I want it to come now, by my own doing, by my own pain and suffering. I'd climb every rung of a thousand ladders like this if I could. But I can't. I can't. I can't."

There was silence. She fought the despair within her. It told her to leave. She could build herself a house; inside she would have a fire that would never dim or cool. It would not be her memory, but it would be close enough.

"I've found it," she told herself through gritted teeth. "I've found it."

Her tears froze to her cheeks.

"It can't be done," an old man in the Last Village said. He said it every night. He had tried when he was a boy, and he derived a perverse pleasure in retelling his failure. "I tried for days. Can't be done. No one ever has."

A tough man nearby looked at them. His eyes were flat and unfocused. He had been drunk and silent all night. "I saw her do it," he said. He spoke to his cup.

"What?" The room became silent.

"I said I saw her do it!" he yelled. "Went straight up. Wasn't even trying." He noticed everyone watching him and turned around in his chair like a dog looking for its tail. "She did! Flew up. Wasn't trying or nothing. I'd say she was pulled up, though I couldn't see anyone else. She was laughing. Like she was a child on her daddy's back. I saw her, I did."

The room lost interest. They all knew he was drunk. He had just returned from failing, as did everyone — except those who killed themselves. "It's impossible," the old man repeated. "Just you go and try. Ain't a person in the world can pull himself up that ladder. Don't know why you would want to. Nothing up there but sky and those awful colors. Nothing at all."

The drunk looked into his empty cup. He had not stopped talking; he continued to mutter to himself. "She was laughing. Laughing like it was the end of the world, and she was glad of it. And she shouted something. Crazy as anything.

"'I remember.' That was it I think. 'I remember,' she said. 'It's home, it's home.'"