

# The Purpose

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This story begins in a land far from here, in both distance and time. I can't tell you exactly how far or how long ago it was. That you can judge for yourself.

It takes place in a kingdom. The name escapes me along with many other small details, but that means nothing to the story I am about to tell. For you see, the story does not start in a castle with a small prince's upbringing. Nor does it begin in a dungeon with the hero's escape to a new life.

It begins with a road. A simple road. It is not a road paved with marble, and it's not a road where an ambush lurks. It is just a simple gravel road.

Now down this road trudged a man. He was miserable and tired and soaked through to the bone. And it was raining too, that's probably an important thing to consider. The man trudged through muck and puddles pulling a stubborn mule behind him.

Here trudged a man with no goals, no reason to go on, and no purpose. Now, what could drive someone to go on living if they are devoid of purpose? I can't think of anything. But, whether it was by some higher power or some other force at work, this man found the will to trudge on.

Now, as I said before, it was raining, he was miserable, and he was crying. Did I mention he was crying? No? Well I guess that it just seemed small in comparison to the rain, but not to him. To this man, his tears made him more miserable than the rain. While the rain made him uncomfortable, his tears represented an unbearable loss. And at that moment he cared nothing for his life.

Down the road he trudged, with no destination. And as the braying of the mule came to a halt, he could hear crying in the distance. He pushed back his sopping hair to get a look ahead of him.

Out in the distance he saw a figure slumped over at the side of the road. He first mistook it for a rock, but when he drew closer, he could almost see a bundle of cloth lying on its back.

The man ran over and tried to rouse the person but to no avail. He looked into the bundle and saw a child no older than half a cycle. It was still crying when he picked it up but as he started to rock it back and forth, the babe grew calm and went to sleep. It looked, well... like what a baby at the age of six rotations always looked like.

The man rolled over the body with his boot and jumped back as he saw that it was a woman that had died from the blue flux. At least he thought that it was a woman. The body had already started to decompose; such were the effects of the blue flux after death. Most of the face was gone which made the man's stomach churn.

She must have been on her own for days caring for the babe. No one would have wanted the plagued woman in their town, so she would've been forced to the forest. The mother might have come here, to the road, to die hoping someone would find her baby.

He went back to his mule with the child in his arms and continued his travels, only this time he did not trudge, for trudging is what a man with no reason to live would do.

“What’s your name, little one?” he asked the sleeping babe. He walked holding it inside his coat to shield it from the rain.

“Mine’s Will,” he continued “and if you’re not going to tell me your name, I’ll have to give you one.”

Then he smiled. It seemed like the first time in cycles, though it could have very well been that long. Again, not so good with the dates, but that still doesn’t matter. What matters is that Will had not been happy for a long while.

“From the look of it you must be a boy so... How about Matt? No? Well Nick maybe? No, I didn’t think so either. What about...”

He carried on for over an hour and then the baby started to cry.

“Well if you don’t like my choices, why don’t you pick one?”

Then he realized that the baby probably hadn’t been fed in hours.

“Don’t worry,” he said rocking the babe with one arm and pulling the mule with the other. “We’re nearing a town and I’ll find you a wet-nurse as soon as I can.”

Just as he had said, they came upon a small town where he could hear laughter and music coming from within the taverns. Will tied his mule to a pole and walked in carrying the babe.

When he entered the room everyone turned to look at the sight of a hairy traveler soaked to the bone with a crying baby in his arms. He just stood there staring back at them; no one wanted to be the first to move.

“Come now!” called the barkeep “Give the man a blanket, Gretel.” As he spoke, an old woman came running over to him with a dry cloth and started to wipe down his face and hair.

“And as for the rest of you,” he continued, “let’s put some life back in this room. Minstrel, give us a song of Looseskirt Lynda.”

No sooner had he finished, that joy filled the room again as the minstrel opened with the bawdy tale of Looseskirt Lynda.

Will thanked the woman for drying him off and walked over to the bar.

“Don’t mind them.” said the barkeep from across the counter. “They’re just not used to seeing an unfamiliar face this far north.”

He extended his hand across the bar. Will noticed he was missing his little finger. He also had a series of scars along the extended arm.

“The name’s Hansel,” he announced as Will shook with his unoccupied arm, “You’ve already met me sister Gretel. Now what can I get for you two gentlemen?”

Will smiled. It was best offer he’d been given all day.

“I’ll take a mug of your finest brew,” he replied pouring out a couple of coins into his hand. He selected a silver plate and slapped it down on the countertop. The barkeep’s eyes rose far past his hairline as Will pocketed the rest.

“My friend,” he said, “for that kind of coin you could get a keg of me finest brew and a slab of the most succulent meat the town has to offer.”

“I’ll just take a mug.” he said with a smile as Hansel began to pour, “His order on the other hand will be the more expensive.” He looked down at the baby, who had stopped crying and was now looking around the room with a gurgling smile.

“He needs a wet-nurse, does he?” Will nodded as Hansel slid him the mug, “We have a few women in town that would set their own child aside for a couple copper plates. But for now me wife can take care of him. Our son just started weaning.”

Will took a long swig from the mug. He shivered as the feeling of warmth returned to his limbs.

“That would be fine, thank you.” he replied with a yawn “Would you also happen to know who I could talk to about some work?”

Hansel thought for a moment.

“Well, I think Lucas could use some help at the smithy. His apprentice just ran off to join the campaigns in the east. Yes, he would be happy to acquire your service, Mister... uhh... I don’t believe I got your name.”

“The names Tomund.” he lied. The baby, suddenly realizing it was hungry again, started to bawl.

“Margaret, could you come here?” Hansel called to the back. A woman emerged and he introduced her.

“Tomund, this is Margaret, me wife.”

“Fair travels, my lady,” exclaimed Will.

“My pardon?” she asked, looking every bit as confused as her husband.

“It’s an expression down south,” Will explained “It means good life.”

“How lovely.” she said, turning to her husband “You want me to play the wet-nurse again, don’t you? Every time a stranger comes in carrying a baby, they need me more than our own children.”

She huffed at him and took the baby from Will.

“I hope you have the coin to pay,” she said to him.

“He has plenty,” Hansel said with a wink. “How did you get all these plates anyhow?”

Will glared at Hansel, and then set his eyes on the mug in front of him.

“I had some land down south belonging to my father,” he said with a cold tone. “I sold it the other day. It brought back some bad memories.”

The couple looked at one another.

“Well what’s his name then?” asked Margaret quickly.

Will looked up at her in surprise. He hadn’t yet picked a name for the child.

“His name is...” he paused “his name is Benedetto”

“Isn’t that the Tarantellan word for ‘Blessed’?” asked Margaret with a smile.

“Yes it is,” answered Will downing the mug. “My wife was a Tarantella.”

And so it was that Will and Benedetto settled down in the town, where they could continue to live and forget their past. With the help of Lucas at the smithy and Hansel at the inn he was able to buy a small plot of land for the boy and himself to live in.

## Six Cycles Later

Tomund had been at the billows for over an hour now and it felt like his lungs were going to give out.

“Just a few more minutes,” Lucas assured him “then you can take the rest of the day off.”

They were working on a tungsten war axe for Lord Cedric’s son. Lord Cedric was the noble entitled to the plot of land on which the village was built. He was not a very wealthy noble, but he had recently invested in some land. You see, during a diplomatic mission in a foreign kingdom, he had managed to stumble upon acres of land containing

tungsten metal. He bought the land and soon, after he brought the metal back, every noble in the kingdom wanted a tungsten blade.

He had found the perfect metal. Tungsten, as it turned out, was much denser than lead and almost as hard as diamond; which was perfect for weapons.

The downside to this discovery was that Tomund and Lucas had been working around the clock making weapons for all the lord's men. The metal had to be heated to over three-thousand and seven-hundred pascals, which even over a blue flame could be challenging.

The axe they had to make for the lord's son, Sir Vallus, was their hardest project yet. The spoiled brat wanted the axe, which he wasn't even strong enough to lift, in three days time. This was why Will and Lucas had been working since dawn to finish the weapon.

Up and down the billows went. Only a few moments now. It's almost over. Sweat cascaded down Will's brow.

Lucas pulled the metal from the fire and began singing to the beat of his hammer, as he shaped the axe.

*Fire's burning, fire's burning.*

*Draw near, draw near.*

*In the glowing, in the glowing.*

*Come sing and be merry.*

After the first verse had finished, Tomund joined in and they sang it in rounds. He never fancied himself much of a singer, but Lucas on the other hand had lungs built for the opera.

The singing helped the blacksmith know how long he could beat the metal. After the fifth round he took the weapon off the anvil and stuck it back in the flames.

"You're done for the day," Lucas said. "Go home."

Tomund smiled and left. He ran down the streets as fast as he could, like a child.

He almost crashed into Gretel as he turned a corner. She dropped her basket of muffins in fright.

"Lord Almighty! Tomund!" she gasped. "Where are ye off to in such a hurry?"

"I'm going to pick up Benedetto from the philosopher," he called back over his shoulder.

The philosopher was an old man that had washed up in the village about three cycles earlier. He had been brought by the same road which had lead Tomund to the village. He was a man of great knowledge and was looking for a place to settle down. When he saw this village, he knew he would live in it for the rest of his life.

Immediately, he had set up a school where he could teach the children of the village. At first he had been shunned because the people did not know what his intentions were. But, after Hansel befriended him, the people began to trust him.

When Benedetto reached the age of four, or at least what Tomund had guessed would be four, the philosopher had been happy to enrol him in his school.

The man's real name was Marcus Halibut but everyone called him the philosopher because of the vast knowledge he had acquired over the years. Marcus could speak

fifteen different languages fluently, and brought, with him, many books and scrolls containing an abundance of wisdom from all over the world.

The best bit about the school was that he didn't charge anything so even the poorest families could send their children to school for the day, including Tomund.

He reached the school just as the philosopher let the kids out. Tomund looked around for Benedetto, but he wasn't to be found anywhere.

As the rest of the students cleared the way Tomund walked into the schoolhouse. His feet creaked on the wooden floorboards and the philosopher looked up from the papers on his desk.

"Ah, Tomund," he announced, gesturing him in. "Come and sit."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Benedetto sitting in the corner sulking.

"Benedetto," Marcus called, "You can come here too now."

The boy stood up and stomped his way up to the front. Tomund remained standing.

"What happened?" he asked. Benedetto had never been kept after class before.

"Benedetto? Would you like to tell your father what happened?" asked the philosopher calmly.

The boy just shook his head and stared down at his feet.

"It would seem that your son here thought that it would be funny to give a... 'Bolivian Sunburn' to one of my female students."

Tomund looked down at Benedetto in disapproval.

"I hope that you will be able to have a talk with him at home. There are some things I have found that only a father can teach his son."

"Yes, of course," Tomund said, ushering Benedetto out quickly. "I'll talk to him about it when we get home."

"And Tomund." Marcus said before Tomund could escape the schoolhouse. "If this kind of behaviour keeps up then I will not allow Benedetto to be in this class anymore."

They walked home in silence. Tomund kept turning to see Benedetto sulking on the other side of the street.

When they got into Tomund's hut, he sat the boy down.

"Do you know what today is?" he asked him quietly.

"My name day," the boy answered between snuffles.

"That's right."

Tomund didn't know what day exactly that the boy was born so they just celebrated the day that he had been named Benedetto.

"Now I can't give you the present that I wanted to"

"I'm sorry," the boy said looking down.

"Why'd you do it?"

"I don't know. I thought it was a joke."

"Why would you think that?"

"When Brandel did it to me everyone laughed. But when I did it to Michelle everyone got angry at me."

Tomund rubbed his eyes. He was getting old.

"Benedetto," he said calmly, "it's not a joke if you hurt someone."

"I'm sorry," he said again, sulking.

“Tomorrow, when you go to school, I want you to apologize to Michelle. Alright?”

“Yes daddy,” he whimpered.

“And promise me that you’ll never do something like that again.”

“I promise.”

“Good,” he said embracing his child.

Tears filled his eyes as he heard Benedetto crying into his chest.

“Don’t worry. Don’t worry.” Tomund said “I still love you. Everything is going to be fine.”

He rocked his son back and forth. Yes, everything was going to be fine.

## Eight Cycles Later

Heat filled the small workshop as Ben stood pumping the billows. His lungs were on fire. How much longer would he have to go on?

“Just a few more moments,” his father announced as if reading his mind.

Just a few more moments. That’s what he said an hour ago. And yet, Ben was still pumping long after that too.

Tomund pulled the tungsten sword out from the coals and began to pound it with his hammer. He began singing a quiet song under his breath as he hammered down on the metal.

Ben could already tell that it would make a fine blade for the stuck up noble who claimed it. He had been an apprentice under his father for five cycles now. Ever since Lucas had retired, Tomund had been the main smith for Lord Cedric.

“Can I go now father?” he asked, trying to think of an excuse “I promised Ulfric I’d help him repair his... his trimming.”

His father smiled at him. Trimming was a technique used to adjust the sails, not something that could be fixed.

“Yes. Fine.” said Tomund finally. “Just be home in time for supper.”

Ben smiled and left. He ran down the streets as fast as he could, like a child.

He almost crashed into Gretel as he turned a corner. She dropped her tray of bread in fright.

“Good heavens! Benny!” she gasped. “Where are ye off to in such a hurry?”

“I’m going to go see Ulfric about a job Aunt Gretel,” he called back over his shoulder.

Gretel shook her head. Like father, like son.

As Ben reached the docks, Ulfric was just pulling into harbour.

“Oi! Ben, catch!” he called from the stern.

Ben held out his arms to catch the rope one of the sailors had thrown. He snatched it from the air and then proceeded to tie the boat down.

Ulfric jumped down from the ship and scooped up Ben in a bear hug. He squeezed the poor kid so tightly Ben thought that his ribs would break.

“Odin’s raven!” he bellowed, putting him down. “It’s great to see you again lad.”

“How was the trip down here?” Ben asked after he caught his breath.

“It was a rough couple of weeks, but we made it. As promised I’m here for your fourteenth name day.”

He looked Ben up and down.

“You ready this year?” he asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Ulfric leaned in close.

“And, have you told your sire?” he asked in a hushed tone.

Ben looked down at his feet.

“I was hoping to do it sometime this week.”

“I’d like to give you the rest of the week, lad, but we’re behind schedule as it is. We’ll be leaving tonight.”

Ben’s jaw dropped. Tonight? Tonight? He needed more time to break the news to his father. But, if he didn’t tell him now, it may be another year before Ulfric could come back for him.

Ulfric saw the discord in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, lad.” he said scratching his beard. “We just need a few hours to gather some supplies and then we’ll be off.”

“Thank you,” said Ben, turning back to the smithy. “I’ll be on that ship this cycle. Just make sure it doesn’t leave without me.”

And with that he was off, but this time he wasn’t in a hurry. He kept playing over the conversation that would certainly come. He drummed up a million reasons why he couldn’t stay here, and why he wanted to travel the world, but he still didn’t have the heart to tell Tomund.

What if it hurt him to know his son didn’t want to stay with him? What if the news killed him?

When he reached the smithy he heard his father coughing from the other side. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Tomund was at the work bench sharpening the sword on the whetstone. He turned to see who had opened the door.

“Ah. Benedetto,” he exclaimed, taking the blade off the stone. “Just in time. I have something for you.”

Ben approached the workbench.

“First, I have to tell you something,” he said putting a hand on his father’s shoulder.

“I’m all ears.”

“What?” Ben asked, confused.

“It’s an expression down south,” Tomund explained.

“Yes. Anyways there is something that I have been meaning to talk to you about.”

Tomund waited to hear more.

“What is it?” he asked after a long pause.

“You know I love you father, but... there is something I’ve wanted to do all my life, and now I have the chance.”

Ben took a deep breath.

“Last cycle, on my name day, Ulfric was at the harbour asking around for hired help. He offered me a job... I told him that I would need time to think about it.”

“And?” Tomund asked, after a moment.

“And I’ve come to the decision that I should leave to sail with Ulfric.”

“Alright.”

"I knew that you wouldn't like it, but... Did you just say 'alright'?"

"Yes. If you want to see the world, go ahead. I won't be the one to stop you."

Ben jaw dropped, again.

"Just like that?" he asked.

"Just like that." his father answered.

He could tell that the boy was baffled.

"It's not that I don't care, because I do, but I realize that you are strong and mature enough to handle your own out in the real world."

Ben was still speechless.

"There is also something that I have been meaning to say to you for a while. I don't really know how to say it, so I'll just tell you."

It was Tomund's turn this time to take a deep breath.

"I am not your father."

"What?" Ben yelped. "H-how..?"

"I'll let you digest that while I explain the 'what' and 'how'."

Tomund turned and hacked into his handkerchief.

"I found you at the side of the road when you were not even a cycle old. It was shortly before I arrived at this village. Now, before I found you, I had fallen into a deep depression. I did not care whether I lived or died. For you see, I had lost my entire family to a village raid when I was off fighting in the wars out east."

He turned and hacked into his handkerchief again. This time he looked disgusted by the green phlegm that covered the cloth.

"When I returned home, I tracked down the men who were responsible and slaughtered them all. Those who would kill my defenceless wife and child surely deserved to die."

Tears now filled his eyes.

"When I was finished, I realized that I had nothing left. I had fought in the wars for my family and I had been driven by revenge after I learnt of their fate. Now I was just a man lost. A man without purpose."

"And then you found me?" asked Ben.

"Yes, my dear boy, then I found you. You put purpose back into my life. It was not I who saved you that day on the road. You were the one that saved me. You became my family."

Tears now filled Ben's eyes too.

"When I found refuge here, I decided that it was time that I let go of my past. So I changed my name and settled down here with you."

"What did it used to be?" Ben asked.

"I already told you once before," Tomund said with a smile.

A few moments passed before either of them spoke.

"Well, I hope you have time for supper." Tomund said.

That night they feasted like kings on fish and bread, and after that, Tomund took Ben down to Hansel's inn for his first drink. Make that his first five drinks. And when they were finished, Tomund walked his son to the docks where Ulfric was just getting ready to cast off.

"Are you ready, lad?" Ulfric called down.

“In a minute,” Ben called back. He could barely stand without the support of Tomund’s shoulder.

Tomund looked at his son, then held up the tungsten sword he had been holding all night.

“For you,” he said, “although I pray you never have to use it.”

Ben’s eyebrow’s rose far passed his hairline.

“That’s supposed to be Lord Cedric’s. Isn’t it?” he exclaimed with a slurred voice “What’s he gonna do when he finds out where it went?”

“You let me worry about Cedric,” his father assured him “Just take care of yourself.”

Ben took that sword with a smile.

“I love you father.”

“I love you too, Ben.”

They embraced each other.

“Come on!” Ulfric yelled from the stern, “We need to get going sometime this rotation.”

Ben managed to scramble up on deck while his father watched and waved from the docks.

“I’ll come visit,” Ben promised.

He kept watching until the lone figure and the harbour was out of site.

And with that, they parted ways. Two strangers who met at a fork in the roads, brought together by fate, bringing each other’s lives meaning and hope. And then, parted as equals at the next fork.

Let it forever be known that the destination has no meaning unless you have experienced the journey. And the journey has no meaning unless it is filled with a purpose.