

## α γυίδε τσ υσυα σωι σεϕρετ ρεαδινγ ρλαϕε

I hadn't edgewalked into Grandpa's secret reading Place for almost two decades. I was 9; now, I'm 29. Not sure what came over me today--might have been the color of the sky, or the smell of the breeze. Maybe a weird cloud. Either way, I was reminded.

I fixed the image of his haven in my mind, closed my eyes, and walked through the nearest doorway. I felt a warm breeze on my face that I knew was perpetually flowing. I smelled the familiar damp leaves and sharp scents--mint, basil, lavender. I heard the loud twits of birds and the chattering of a squirrel somewhere above me. Without even opening my eyes, I could feel the aura of this little Place soaking into my skin, calming my nerves. The light of a perpetual summer evening bathed my face, awakening an incredible nostalgia and longing. This was a Place to simply be.

Grandpa had always said to get anywhere you just need a will and a doorway. The same was true for this Place. Grandpa had told us the story of his first trip here. He had followed the Guide's<sup>1</sup> instructions to the letter and edgewalked himself into a beautiful, empty grassy field called the Blank. Now, edgewalking only required a door frame, so getting there wasn't terribly hard. It was getting back that was the problem. Without a doorway to go through, he was stuck there for days. During that time, he deciphered more and more of the Guide and learned about many of the instructions and methods it had for manipulating the Blank. Grandpa told us the story of how he used the Guide to grow a tree which he then pulled down, tore apart, and built into a doorway he could use to edgewalk home.

Of course, Claire and I had no idea the Guide worked when we gave it to Grandpa. We had found the book ourselves, hidden behind some kids' books at our local library. Heavy and intricate, and well-bound, we excitedly thumbed through it. The pages were thick and gold-leafed and shimmered in the bland fluorescent light of the library. The pictures were beautiful, but the text was in a bizarre script<sup>2</sup>, and completely unreadable to our young eyes. Grandpa knew many languages, so we cleaned it up a bit, wrote him a little note ("we hope you like the book, Grandpa!") stickied to the cover<sup>3</sup>, and left it in his study.

I opened my eyes, gazing at the surreal tranquility of the Place. It looked like it had always looked--albeit with more books. Piles and piles of them everywhere. Grandpa had clearly been busy. A soft wind wove in and out of the stacks of books, tousling my hair gently. Next to me, Friedrich the tree slumbered<sup>4</sup>, his enormous lumbar mustache<sup>5</sup> twitching as he dreamt. His brilliant green leaves ruffled in the light breeze<sup>6</sup>. My eye was immediately drawn to a large, ornate lamp swinging from one of Friedrich's branches<sup>7</sup>. Boiling and swirling inside were brilliant hues of pink and blue and orange, like Grandpa had captured a rainbow. A book buried nearby, clearly similar to the Guide, had a label written in Grandpa's neat script: "Locking a Sunset"<sup>8</sup>.

After Grandpa had completely decoded the Guide and plumbed the depths for its secrets, he learned that it was not the only one of its kind. Throughout the centuries, similar texts written in the same rune-like calligraphy had appeared, each providing a more focused look at an aspect of the Blank. Grandpa made it

his mission to find and collect as many as he could, purchasing them at auctions and digging through libraries. More often than not, they were exceptionally well-hidden or protected by intense puzzles. These puzzles were no match for Grandpa, however, and he bypassed each with ease before adding them to his collection in the Blank. He'd spend months decoding and perusing their contents, safe in his Place. As lovely as the Blank was, it did not come without its challenges, and the Books offered insights and instructions on how to overcome each and every one.

Take, for example, the birds of the Blank. Small, with brown and black plumage and a loud, crystal call<sup>9</sup>. It wasn't clear how they arrived or where they came from, but according to Grandpa, they had always been here. Belligerent and persistent, they did not like strangers. And since I had not been here for twenty years, "stranger" is exactly what I looked like. They flew through Friedrich's protective branches, settling on Grandpa's massive reading chair, on the piles of books, on my shoulders, glaring at me. I froze, then one of the books in the pile caught my eye. "Befriending Birds", Grandpa had labeled it<sup>10</sup>. He had run into the same problem with the birds. On his first interaction with them, they had chewed up most of his clothes. Remembering what he taught me and Claire when we were younger, I slowly sat cross-legged. The birds followed me closely. I began to whistle the first song that popped into my head—"Blueberry Hill" by Fats Domino. Then Billy Joel's "Don't Ask Me Why". After a few minutes of this, the birds relaxed and went back to doing whatever birds do in the Blank. Lots of seed hunting and worm pulling. I wondered: did Grandpa have a book about worms in the Blank?

I picked my way around the piles and piles of books to the chair. Large and in charge, Grandpa had inherited the chair from *his* Grandpa<sup>11</sup>. It was indestructible. Ivy had begun to take over the chair, climbing on the armrests and the seat back<sup>12</sup>, sprouting vivid green leaves wherever it could find light<sup>13</sup>, growing dark conservative shoots wherever it could not<sup>14</sup>. I gently moved Grandpa's thick spectacles<sup>15</sup> to the top of the nearest pile of books, next to a framed picture of me and Claire partially illuminated by the setting sun<sup>16</sup>, before settling into the chair. Immediately, a squirrel that had been foraging behind the chair at Friedrich's base<sup>17</sup> leaped up into my lap, curled up, and fell asleep. I stroked his bright orange fur gently. For years, the territorial squirrels had been as much of a nuisance to Grandpa as the birds. One of the books Grandpa hunted down revealed that the squirrels were, in fact, highly intelligent<sup>18</sup> and required only some thoughtful discussions every now and then to stay mollified. Grandpa organized regular salons with the furred rodents<sup>19</sup> and most of his problems with them went away.

Will-o'-the-wisps drifted aimlessly around<sup>20</sup>. I propped up my feet on Grandpa's footrest, crudely hacked out of a log<sup>21</sup>. His feet had worn small patches on the log down from many years of use<sup>22</sup>. The dark outer bark was completely worn away in these spots, with the shining white inner bark clearly visible. Looking out through Friedrich's branches, I could see the infinite plain of the Blank, caught in its endless summer evening. The light of the setting sun streamed out from behind me, casting long shadows. At the very edge of the world, just below where the horizon began to yield a dusk that would never come, 19 stars were arranged in a line. One for each year Grandpa had been here. Constellation creation was one of the final lessons in the Guide, and Grandpa's favorite.

The Guide. I looked around, and saw it on a small stack of books Grandpa kept at the base of his chair at all times<sup>23</sup>. I reached down and lifted it into my lap. The note Claire and I had written was still there,

faded and falling apart. The adhesive had failed more than a decade ago, but Grandpa had lovingly taped it back<sup>24</sup>. On the cover, in strong, bold font were the words

*α guide το υσυα σων σεζρετ ρεαδινγ πλαζε*<sup>25</sup>

I opened the Guide for the first time in two decades. The heavy, shimmering pages felt as magical as always. The rune-like script, once so mysterious and mythical, didn't seem so unreadable anymore. I felt as though the magic instructions lying beneath were whispering up at me, just below the range of my hearing. When I first laid eyes upon the Guide, the language used inside was so strange I didn't even try to decipher it. Now, the script seemed parseable. The runes didn't seem so mystical anymore; instead, I could feel their power roiling below their outwards appearance. I was filled with a sudden, intense desire to lock myself in a room until every secret of the Guide and every similar book had been teased and coaxed forth. Is this what Grandpa had felt when we had gifted the Guide to him, all those years ago?

I snapped the Guide shut abruptly. Grandpa wouldn't mind me reading the Guide--in fact, he'd probably teach me how--but I decided it was time to be going. Perhaps when I had grandkids of my own, I would come back to really enjoy this Place. But now, I missed my family. I stood up and gently placed the Guide back on the small stack. Grandpa kept a couple of door frames behind Friedrich that he used to get home<sup>26</sup>--a lesson learned from his first stay here. On my way to the doors, laying on the ground, I passed a new flowerbox Grandpa added, filled with flourishing spices and wildflowers<sup>27</sup>. So that's where that good smell was coming from!

I stood over the nearest door frame, which lay flat. Opening the door revealed nothing but the grassy ground, but that was expected. I took one last look at this beautiful Place, created over decades by the insatiable curiosity and perseverance of my grandfather. Then, I closed my eyes, thought of home, and jumped.

