

The Man Who Wanted to Live Forever

Once there was a man who wanted to live forever. And his name was Bodkin. He loved his family and his friends and his village, and he thought the world was such a wonderful place he never wanted to leave it.

So off Bodkin went to the wise woman who lived in a cave by the river on the edge of the village, and asked her, "What must I do to live forever?"

"Difficult, very difficult," she replied. "I don't know, but if you speak to the Old Man of the Forest, I'm sure he will tell you. He is the oldest and wisest man I know."

So off Bodkin went, walking along the winding river, and then deeper and deeper into the forest until the trees towered over him and everything looked the same whichever way he looked. Then he heard the sound of an axe chopping wood. He followed the sound until he came to Old Man of the Forest, who was sitting, mopping his brow on a tree that had just been felled.

"Is it true that you will live forever?" Bodkin asked.

"I will live as long a single tree survives in this forest," replied the old man.

"That's no good. Someday, the last tree *will* be cut down, and then you *will* die. What must I do to live *forever*?"

"Difficult, very difficult," said the old man. "I don't know, but if you speak to the Old Man of the Lake, I'm sure he will tell you. He is the oldest and wisest man I know."

So off Bodkin went, until he found a huge lake. He couldn't see anyone or anything except for a little boat. So he rowed out into the lake, further and further until the shore disappeared and everything looked the same whichever way he looked.

Then he heard the sound of somebody taking great gulps of water, and he rowed towards it. He found the Old Man of the Lake leaning over the side of a boat drinking deeply.

"Is it true that you will live forever?" Bodkin asked.

"I will live as long as a single drop remains of this lake," replied the old man.

"That's no good. Someday, the last drop *will* be gone, and then you *will* die. What must I do to live *forever*?"

"Difficult, very difficult," said the old man. "I don't know, but if you speak to the Old Man of the Mountain, I'm sure he will tell you. He is the oldest and wisest man I know."

So off Bodkin went until he found a huge mountain. He went up steeper and steeper until the snow was all around him, right up to the castle at the very top where the Old Man of the Mountain lived.

He was just about to knock on the door, when it opened and the Old Man of the Mountain came out to greet him.

“Hello! I know why you’ve come. Easy, very easy. Come and live with me. I shall live as long as there is a single stone left of this mountain.”

So there Bodkin stayed. He lived in the castle with the old man for seven hundred years, watching from the top of the mountain as the land changed around them, and great armies came and went over the hills below. But eventually, he became restless and wanted to see his old village. The old man told him it would only make him unhappy, and not to go. But Bodkin insisted.

So the old man said, “Very well. I will lend you my horse. But whatever you do, you must not get down from the horse and step on the ground for anything until you return.”

So off Bodkin went. And he rode down the mountain, and through a desert where the lake had been, and through an empty plain where the forest had been, and along the dried-up bed where the river had been, and past the old woman’s cave that had been blocked up with stones.

And where his village had been, there was now a great city with tall buildings and wide streets full of people whose clothes and words were strange. Nothing was as he remembered.

So off Bodkin went, riding back towards the castle. But he had not gone far when he came across an old man struggling with a cart that had lost a wheel. He noticed that the back of the old man’s cart was piled high with old, worn out shoes.

“Please help me!” called the old man. “The wheel has fallen off of my cart, and I can’t get it back on by myself.”

But Bodkin remembered the warning of the Old Man of the Mountain. “I’m truly sorry, but I have been told I must not get off this horse for anything.”

He went to ride on, but the old man looked so pitiful and helpless, he changed his mind. He got down from his horse and mended the old man’s cart.

“At last!” said the old man. “Thank you for your help. I’ve been waiting so, so long.”

“That’s alright,” said Bodkin. “By the way, who are you and why are you carting all these old shoes about in the first place?”

Bodkin had one foot lifted to get back on his horse, when he felt the old man’s grip on his shoulder, much stronger than he would have imagined.

“You have made thing difficult for me, very difficult,” said the old man. “I am death, and these are all the shoes I have worn out these many long years running after you.”

So off Bodkin went.

Thinkers' notes on the story

This story, with its themes of mortality and fate, might seem heavy going, but I was introduced to it by someone who has used it from Year 3 upwards to great effect. Children show surprising maturity and resilience in discussing the subject of death, although it's obviously not one for the recently bereaved.

One common question is "Can you escape your fate?" This invites further questions about how much control you have in your life, the part that luck plays, and whether fate is controlled by somebody else.

Another question is "Would living forever be boring?" Groups often think this depends on the detail. If everyone you love also lived forever, perhaps not – but then presumably there would be no children either and everything would end up in stasis. Another angle groups may pursue is eternal life after death; how it could be different to an eternal earthly life so it would not get boring.

The story merits close attention. Has the Old Man of the Forest cut down the tree himself? Why doesn't the Old Man of the Lake stop drinking it? And then there's the poignancy of Bodkin, moved by pity, getting down from his horse. Perhaps the message is that our shared vulnerability to aging and death unites us in compassion.

Or perhaps this story survives, not so much because of its themes, but because it has a rather deliciously chilling ending and our species has always enjoyed a good scare.