

The Queue

She had suffered all her life. It was something at the very core of her, a problem of lifetimes, a question to which she had never found any satisfactory answer.

Then she heard of a wise woman who lived high in the far mountains. It seemed this holy woman had never failed to resolve any question posed to her. The suffering woman was suddenly very sure, very determined. She left her job and family, and she trekked across the desert to reach the mountains. The desert was arduous, and the subsequent foothills difficult; but, at great length, she arrived at the mountain community, half way up the holy mountain.

There were thousands living there, a minor civilization amid the mountain wastes. There were temples and shelters, shacks, shops and makeshift banks. And there was a queue, an impossible human thread winding up and away towards the distant summit: a holy queue for all who had made their way here from across the globe, hoping to find the answer to their question. The mountain pass towards the summit was tricky and narrow, and it was not permitted for anyone to travel up to the summit first, to take a peek at what they were queuing for. One had to join the queue, at its very base, on trust.

It soon became clear that this was no ordinary queue. Women joined it newly pregnant, and walked their toddlers back down from the summit. Middle-aged men arrived full of vigorous expectation, grew lengthy beards, returning stooped and grey with their question answered. Some queuers never reached their destination at all, but died en route. Meanwhile, a small army of volunteer helpers moved to and fro, tending to the needs of the queue. Arranging food and drink, they were heroic in their efforts to solve the many awkwardnesses of maintaining cleanliness, health and modesty on an exposed mountain pass. The helpers cut hair, brought fresh clothes and blankets, cared for the sick, and carried messages to and from home. The suffering woman saw all this. She drew herself together, took a deep breath, and joined the queue.

Months elapsed; seasons shifted. Friendships with her helpers and fellow queue members were forged and matured. All the while, the suffering woman crept up the valley towards the snowy cap, sustained by the knowledge that the wise woman had never faltered in answering a devotee's question. The weather, for all its seasonal variations, freshened noticeably as she climbed; after some years, it was consistently, uncomfortably cold. The suffering woman wove of her heart a nest for the waiting egg of her question.

One crisp morning, wrapped in her blanket, she glimpsed what awaited her. It was a scattered huddle centred on the dark speck of the holy woman, a small and smoky camp far up by the fringes of snow. Some weeks later, she was close enough to make out heavy wisps of incense rising into the near-indigo of mountain sky. At last, she could discern the form of the holy woman herself, still some distance away, swaddled in saffron and black. The entourage darted back and forth to attend to her. A shallow stream, a few inches deep, clearer than ice, ran between the front of the queue and the wise woman. The suffering woman watched intently as each devotee in turn stepped forward from the head of the queue, across the harsh stones, crossing the stream to kneel and present themselves. It was impossible to hear anything that was being said: each sacred meeting could only be witnessed as the faintest of murmurings merging with the murmuring stream, carried off on the mountain breeze.

Morning came, and there were now just three devotees ahead of her. These people had become brothers and sisters to her. Now the foremost was stumbling across the wide space maintained between the head of the queue and where the holy woman was, sitting beneath a large umbrella in the cloud-drizzle. It was dusk when the suffering woman found herself at the very head of the queue. For the first time in many years, there was no one ahead of her. She felt beneath her feet the sour stones she would soon stumble across, barefoot. She could hear the gentle stream, tinkling its wind-chime music.

Suddenly, the holy woman's assistants were making gestures for the suffering woman to come forward. They were waving her – her, not someone else – towards that cosmic face, a face at one with the mountain, coeval with cloud and sky. For a moment, across the stream, across the sharp stones and freezing air, those calm eyes held the suffering eyes in their gaze, encouraging the suffering woman to approach in freedom, to pose her question.

The suffering woman bowed low, so low. But she did not step forward, did not cross the stream. She thought of all those helpers, struggling up and down the pass. She turned, and without a word or backward glance, made her way down the mountain.