

The Shield

by Ben Loory

A man and his wife are walking through a museum when the man sees a shield on the wall. Look at that! he says. Isn't that remarkable?

The two of them walk a little closer.

What's so remarkable about it? says his wife.

Well, the workmanship! says the man. It's exquisite!

It's just a shield, says his wife. It's a big hunk of metal. There's not even anything painted on it.

Well I think it's nice, the man says, after a while.

But there isn't really much more to say.

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That evening, the man and his wife go to dinner at a friend's house.

You should have seen this shield, the man says.

Oh? says the friend. Tell me about it.

There's nothing to tell, the wife says. It was just a shield.

I've always wanted to be a knight, says the man. It just seems like it would be so much fun.

Fun? says his wife. It's a good way to get killed!

Not with a shield like that! says the man.

And the friend, at least, laughs along with him.

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On the way home, the man has a hard time concentrating on the road. He has had too much to drink, and, in his mind, he is jousting with another knight on horseback. He is doing very well; he is winning. Let's stop by the museum, he says to his wife.

What? his wife says. Are you kidding?

The man is not kidding. He drives to the museum and parks across the street from it.

You can't be serious, says his wife. You're going to get arrested.

No I won't, says the man. Don't you have any faith?

The man heads toward the museum.

His wife stays in the car.

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Inside, the museum is dark and very still. The man makes his way down the long rows of artifacts. He keeps an eye out for guards, but none seem to be around.

Finally, he stops before the shield.

There you are, the man says, and lowers it from the wall.

In the gray light of the darkened museum, the man becomes aware of something strange. There is actually a figure, almost transparent, painted on the shield. It is a horse—a white, winged horse.

The man holds up the shield to admire it.

Then he slides it down onto his arm, and mimes a sword fight across the museum floor.

The man fights and fights and fights and fights, and then he fights some more, and then he fights just a little more, and then he takes a break, and then he fights some more, and then he fights and fights a little more.

Finally, after hours and hours, the man is completely spent. He is dripping with sweat, and his muscles ache.

Thank you, shield, the man says. I'll see you again some time.

And he puts it back up on the wall and goes out to the car.

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That night, the man lies in bed with his wife.

I can't believe you did that, she says. You jeopardized everything—everything we have.

Everything? the man says. Like what?

Your freedom, our money, our reputation, says his wife. You would have lost your job if you'd been caught.

My job, says the man, making a noise of disgust.

What exactly are you trying to do? says his wife.

Trying to do? the man says. I'm not trying to do anything. I just like the shield; that's all.

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The next day—the man can't help it—he goes back to the museum again. It is during business hours, so the place is very crowded. It takes the man quite some time to elbow his way through all the people down the hall to medieval arms.

And then, when he gets there, he finds something terrible. The shield—his shield—is no longer there.

In its place on the wall hangs only a sword.

The man stands in silence and stares at it.

Where is the shield that was hanging there yesterday? the man says to the guard on duty.

What shield? says the guard. That sword's been hanging there for as long as I can remember.

The man looks back in confusion to the sword. The sword is not the shield, any way you look at it.

Can I touch it? he says.

If you want to go to jail, says the guard. It's your choice, doesn't matter much to me.

The man stands and stands there.

And then, suddenly, he lunges.

The fight lasts for some time. With the sword, the man is invincible. The guard has a gun, but really can't use it. The man swings the sword around in a protective circle.

I just want the shield, he yells. Just give me the shield and I'll go!

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That night, the man sits in jail. His wife was supposed to bail him out, but she didn't. The man sits and frowns. Then he hears someone humming.

An old man sits beside him on the bench.

Hello, says the old man.

Good evening, says the man. What did they get you for?

Vagrancy, the old man says. Nothing too exciting. What about you? You don't look like much of a lawbreaker.

Well, the man says, I had an altercation at the museum.

Ah, the old man says. The shield?

You know it? says the man. His eyes are very wide.

Well of course, the old man says. Doesn't everyone?

The man doesn't know where to start with the questions, but it turns out the old man knows nothing.

It's the drink, the old man says. Really, I'm sorry. I just have a lot of memory problems.

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When the man gets out of jail, his wife drives him home.

Look, the man says, I want a divorce.

You're not the only one, his wife says. Let's do it. In fact, let's do it tomorrow.

The proceedings are begun. The man moves out. He gets a small apartment on the cheap side of town. His stuff sits in boxes; he has an old chair from Goodwill.

Luckily, the two never had children.

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The man goes to work every day as usual. He comes home, eats something, watches TV. Sometimes at night he goes out for a stroll.

One night, he goes by the museum.

It is dark outside, of course—like it was when he broke in. But now the place appears heavily guarded. There is a fence and a guard with a big dog and a gun. The man stares up at the window where he squeezed in. He thinks about that night in the silent museum hall, the night he spent with the shield. Those were the good times, the man remembers. The times when anything seemed possible. The man finds himself whistling on the way home. He doesn't know when it started, or what the song is. It's a strange song—though familiar—and as he whistles it, it starts to remind him of something. It reminds him of a place he once went before, a place beautiful and very far away. And the remembrance of that place seems to spur him on, and suddenly he's picking up the pace. He's jogging down the middle of the road, and then he breaks into a run. And then he's running as fast as he can, and it feels like he's about to take off. By the time the man gets to the cheap side of town, he's never felt so good in his life. And he blows right by that dingy apartment and off into wide open space.

