

about 900 words

BANJO MAN

By Lloyd Hudson Frye

He was old, real old. I was young, real young, eight and a half to be exact. It was 1888 and I was in a small park south of Main Street. It was spring but it wasn't warm yet. I had a heavy jacket pulled tight against my chest. I looked around and saw a rock in the sun and I went to it like moth to a flame. The sun did its job and I could relax and watch as the old man tightened his banjo strings. Jimmy was to meet me today later, so I had an hour or so to kill until then. The Jeremy brothers were there, I didn't like them much. Probably twenty townsfolk were standing around in groups of two to four, talking about the weather I suppose.

He wasn't on the stage or anything like that, but he was down in front and I couldn't get my eyes off him. He

was tall and skinny and bent over from the rib cage. It was a strange stance. He was straight as a board from his feet to half-way up his chest then his torso jutted forward somehow, like a broken match, bent but not broken off. His clothes were ragged, torn and frayed from top to bottom. He wore a union jacket with most of the buttons missing and britches made from deer skin. His hat was a mountain man's hat with a band of snake skin. His boots were riding boots and worn until they had no color of their own. He seemed comfortable down front like he had once been someone to be reckoned with. The banjo was dirty and worn around the aperture and along the neck. As I watched him I became aware I was staring but I couldn't stop. Warmed up I moved closer because it was obvious he was going to play that thing any minute from the sounds of his tuning the strings. I picked the side where I could get close without being blocked by those standing around.

The pickin' started and all eyes turned to watch the stranger. His fingers flashed across the worn wood as he used those long, thick finger nails that looked yellow from where I sat. It was some kind of dance song, all lively and festive. His eyes were buried deep under bushy eyebrows made up of long curled grey hair that looked as thick as winter straw. His face was a mat of jagged, cracked flesh

like a piece of meat left out in the desert. The lines horizontally more or less from his uneven hair line down to a jaw lined with short beard hairs that made him look like a cactus. The furrows in his face weren't shallow so you see the bottoms of the troughs but deep and disappeared into the shadows. He looked at his audience one person at a time as he played the lively music. When his eyes got around to me I felt faint and looked away, I was just a boy, of no matter. I was flushed and embarrassed about being scared to look him in the eye. I looked around, others were looking away just as I had.

Then it started, a song that sounded like it had been sung at a campfire by a gatekeeper of one of the lost tribes of Israel when they first arrived in the British Isles. The banjo man closed his eyes and I saw the profile of an ancient face, worn from a thousand wind storms, revived by a hundred thousand sunrises. His voice half hummed, half groaned a song of hope and despair. I closed my eyes. I sat on the edge of a towering cliff with a winding river curling back on itself thousands of feet below. A wind pushed me further to the edge, yet I wasn't afraid. My soul lifted up and spread over me as if to protect me. I lost all contact with the cliff, the park, the town, even those around me. The song continued and I

became the old man, his words were mine, his sorrow my sorrow, his hope my hope. A tingling started in the very top of my head and slowly spread down until the very tips of my toe nails were stinging from something I've never felt before. I couldn't move, I couldn't open my eyes, I couldn't find my way back to the park, to the town, to my body, to my mind.

The song came to a stop. There was no clapping, no talking, no whispering, nothing. I finally opened my eyes even though I didn't want to. I wanted to stay in that place he had taken me. A place where the sun was warm, the air was light blue and scented with nectar, the breeze that stroked my temples gently with loving affection, and the grass I sat on that so crisp and clean it squeaked when I moved.

He was gone. No one seemed surprised and eventually we all left the park not saying a word to anyone else. I was never the same after that day. I believed in love, and peace, and justice, and that life was the single most wonderful gift the Gods could have ever come up with, to share with mankind.

THE END