

Bran the Blessed

*May the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rain fall soft upon your fields,
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.*
-Irish blessing

Long ago, in a land by the sea, there came into the world a boy named Brandon. He was not so unusual to look at, and for a long time no one thought much about him one way or the other, except sometimes to remark how wonderfully well he got along with his sister.

The sister's name was Branwen, and these two loved each other very much, and they were never apart unless they had to be.

Their father herded sheep on the green grassy hills, and Brandon and Branwen did likewise as soon as they were old enough.

In those days the land had been at war for many years, till the people had almost forgotten what peace was like, and their hearts were heavy and sorrowful.

Now Branwen grew in time to be the most beautiful girl in all the land, and the kindest and gentlest of heart. And Brandon was beyond compare the bravest and strongest of all the young men.

So beautiful was Branwen, and so noble was Brandon, that even the King of Eyre heard tell of them in his castle across the sea, and he decided to set aside the war between their two lands, to come and see them both for himself.

So it was that on a day in the bright spring, King Lucas of Eyre came sailing across the sparkling sea with the wind at his back, and he first set foot on the beaches of Cambria in the early morning, with ten thousand nobles and soldiers beside him.

The people were terrified when they saw such an army encamped on the shore, and they hid themselves among the rocks of the mountains and dared not come out.

Of all the young men of Cambria that day, Brandon alone was not afraid, and he offered himself to walk down to the enemy's camp and talk to them. The others took courage when he said this, and so it was that three of them went with him to speak to King Lucas before noon.

But when they came within sight of the camp, the others lost heart and turned back, leaving Brandon to go on alone. He did so, and soon he came to the edge of the camp, where a soldier on guard called out to him.

"Who goes there?" he called, for he'd seen no one all day.

“My name is Brandon, and I’ve come to ask the King of Eyre the reason for his visit today,” Brandon said to the man. Then the soldier smiled.

“That I can tell you already, young man. The King wished for only two things today, to speak to brave Brandon, and to see the sweet face of Branwen the Fair, for King Lucas has heard of them even in Eyre. Come in, and be welcome!” the soldier exclaimed. He sheathed his long sword and offered his hand, and Brandon allowed him to lead.

The camp was vast, a city of tents, and each one of them was full of the soldiers of Eyre. But Brandon stood tall in the camp that day, and the men of Eyre loved him for his courage, and gave him great honor. Before long he reached a tent of green and white silk where King Lucas sat on his great golden throne. The King stood to meet him, and Brandon knelt at his feet.

Lucas looked in his eyes long and hard, and whatever he saw there must have given him much to think about, for he didn’t say a word to Brandon at all, and the silence was filled only with the sound of waves on the shore. At long last the King smiled, and asked Brandon to stand.

“I’ve seen the noble Brandon, and that was well worthy of coming. But now where is your sister, the beautiful Branwen? For I wish to see her before I leave, as well,” he said.

“My sister has gone to the mountains to pray, and be safe from the battle we feared, Great King. But I can fetch her very quickly, if it pleases you to wait,” Brandon offered, and the King smiled and nodded.

So Brandon departed from the camp for a while, to look for his sister in the mountains. He found her at last by the shores of Lake Miruvel, and their meeting was glad in the white morning mist.

“Where have you been, dear brother?” she cried, throwing her arms round his shoulders. He was happy as well, but no smile touched his face, for he knew there were serious things to discuss.

“I’ve spoken with King Lucas of Eyre. He tells me he wishes to see you, and for that reason he has crossed the sea with his men. He says he’ll gladly return to his land, if only he can look on your beauty just once. It might be so, dear sister. But I fear he could change his mind when he sees you,” he told her, and held her small hand.

Branwen considered these things, and finally she smiled to comfort his fear.

“That may be, dear brother. But in the meantime our land is in danger, and it might also be that this King is sincere. I’ll go down and sing to him, and lull his heart, then maybe he’ll leave us in peace,” she said.

Then the two of them returned to the camp of King Lucas by the shore. The men were struck speechless by the beauty of Branwen, for it was greater by far than they had ever imagined. King Lucas too was amazed by the sight, and his tongue felt dry in his mouth when he spoke.

“I will never call anything lovely, nor ever see beauty on earth again, except in the face of Branwen,” he declared when he finally spoke. She smiled at his words, and King Lucas loved her, forgetting everything else in the fire of his heart.

“Come with me, young maiden, and I’ll make you a queen over all the land of Eyre beyond the whispering sea. And I’ll never again make war on this land, the home of Branwen the beloved,” he cried.

Then Branwen accepted, and the camp rejoiced, that peace should have come out of unexpected love.

The people feasted for weeks till the wedding was done. Then Branwen the Fair and Lucas the King embarked on his ship and departed for Eyre. And Brandon was happy, but sad as well, for he loved his sister very dearly.

For almost a year the news was good, and Branwen could only speak well of King Lucas. But then in the fall of the following year, no more letters came again across the bright wide sea. And Brandon feared only the worst.

Branwen was happy in Eyre at first, but in time her joy faded, for the women in the castle were jealous. None of them loved their new queen, not at all, and Lucas in time came to believe all their whispers. He began to find fault with his queen in small things, and then before long in larger ones too. At last all love had died in his heart, and he cast his wife into prison.

She found herself locked in a pig sty in rags, in the middle of winter forsaken and friendless. The women came to laugh and spit on her face, and only the pigs in the sty kept her warm. Her beauty was such that the King wouldn’t kill her, but he kept her in prison while months rolled by.

But Branwen was faithful, and never lost heart, and she prayed to God every night in the snow, that somehow her brother might hear of her pain.

Then one evening as Branwen prayed, God sent a dream to Brandon while he slept. He saw his dear sister in rags in the mud, and then he heard her call out his name. He woke up in fear and put on his sword and his traveling clothes, for the dream was so strong that it couldn’t be doubted. He set out for the shore by the light of the moon, for he could never rest a minute till he knew his sister was safe.

But no one would listen to Brandon’s wild tale, and they told him to hush before his words caused a war. Not a single ship could he find that would carry him to Eyre, not

for love nor money nor anything else. Brandon could plead for as long as he wished, but the hearts of the sailors were harder than stone.

Therefore Brandon fell down on his knees in the sand, and he begged the dear Lord for help, and he cared not at all who might see him.

Then God answered swiftly, and Brandon grew large. He grew till his head touched the clouds in the sky, and his feet shook the earth when he walked.

Then he went down and waded the cold gray sea, and God laid a calm on the wind and the waves till at last he set foot on the beaches of Eyre, and shrunk down again to his own normal size.

But the land was deserted when he reached the far shore, and he saw not a soul to help him. For the people on the coast had seen him approaching, and in terror they hid from his sight. Word spread like wildfire that a giant was coming, who would crush every man in his path. So no one was left to see Brandon shrink down, or to know that the giant and he were the same.

He wandered alone for a very long time, for the land was wild and the people unfriendly, and no one would tell him the way he should go. But he never gave up, and his love never dimmed.

Finally then on a day in late spring, when the west winds blew and the bright sun shone, Brandon found his way at last to the castle of Lucas, and there he demanded to see the King.

The King was not pleased that Brandon had come, and pretended he was much too busy to talk. But Brandon was patient, and wouldn't go away, and he stood there for weeks by the gate. The whole time he waited he prayed and sang hymns, and he told his whole story to anyone who would listen. Then the people of Lucas loved him for his faithfulness, and they brought him hot food and warm clothes and fire. And when he told them how God let him wade across the sea they looked at him in awe, and in Eyre he was first called the Blessed.

The King heard these things, and his heart filled with hate, for Brandon had put him to shame. So he decided to kill him in secret, and crush the young fool who would dare to embarrass him.

So King Lucas called for Branwen to be brought, and he clothed her in silks and velvet once more, and he spoke to her kindly and asked her forgiveness. But none of these things did he truthfully mean, for his heart was black with anger. Branwen doubted his words, but when she heard that her brother had come at long last, her joy was so great that she forgot about the past altogether.

Then Lucas saw that his wife had forgiven him, and he knew that he owed it to Brandon. And he hated them both all the more because of that.

Then the King declared a feast to honor Queen Branwen, and all the great nobles of Eyre were invited, and even those of Cambria beyond the wide sea. For the King had a plan to be rid of Branwen forever, and her people as well if he could.

For a month he plotted in secret, and for all that time the King gave no hint. He guarded his secret like a chest of pure gold, and only a few knew his scheme.

But on Midsummer's Day the flags were unfurled, and the feast began. On the third day the King judged the time was right, and he hid twenty soldiers behind curtains in the feast hall. The signal for attack would be the death of the Queen, when a soldier would stab her from behind. The King ordered his people that no one should disturb them or come into the feast hall, no matter what might be heard from inside. For he hoped to blame the killing on the Cambrian nobles, and give himself a reason to make war on their land.

All this was done, and the King himself stabbed the Queen, for he hated her so much that he wanted the pleasure for his own. When Branwen fell down on the cold stone floor, then the soldiers of Eyre jumped out and attacked.

The battle was fierce and long in the feast hall, but the Cambrian men were more brave than the King thought. At last no one was left except Brandon and Lucas. The rest were all dead on the floor. Then Brandon himself killed Lucas the King, and the feast hall was quiet and still.

Brandon went quickly to Branwen his sister, and he wept bitter tears, for he thought she was dead. But then he saw her still breathing, and hope filled his heart. He took care of her wound the best that he could, and then picked her up in his arms and carried her away. For he knew that the scene of the battle would be found, and then it would be death for them both if they stayed.

The people in the castle knew them both by sight, and no one dared stop them for fear of the King. They soon reached the docks on the river nearby, and Brandon took his sister to the smallest boat he could find. Then he fled from the land of King Lucas.

In three days they crossed to the Cambrian shore, and the people wept bitterly for the loss of their men, and they feared a new war would come quickly. They laid all the blame on Brandon and Branwen, and some even said they should both be killed. The mood in the town was so black at the time that Brandon knew it wasn't safe to remain there.

Therefore he and two friends took Branwen away, to a castle in the south by the shores of the sea where not many men lived. The earl of that place was a healer of hurts,

and no one knew where Brandon and Branwen had gone. Therefore all the more did the townspeople curse them, as cowards who fled in the night.

But Brandon cared nothing for that, because Branwen lay close to death. At times she would open her eyes and speak, but such times grew more rare as the days passed by, and he feared she couldn't live for much longer. Then he wept in his room, and no one could comfort him.

But Brandon remembered his prayer on the beach, and how God had answered when no one else would help. So he prayed once again, and he begged that her life be spared, no matter what he might have to do to save her.

Then he saw in a vision a land which was lovely and sweet, and he saw himself walking slowly through fields of gold flowers. His hand plucked a fruit from a beautiful tree, and he saw himself give it to Branwen. Then she was healed, and the vision was over. But somehow he knew that that land was in the east.

Then Brandon arose, and he decided at once to search for that place, for he knew it was Branwen's only hope. He departed from the castle that very same day, and went down to the shore to find a ship.

But the men of that village were afraid of wild lands and uncharted seas, and at first there was no one who would help him, just as before.

At last an old man took pity, and he gave him a one-man boat barely large enough to be seaworthy. Brandon loaded it up with food for a month, for he didn't know how long he might be gone.

Then he sailed out to sea in the evening dusk, and by morning he was far from all land. For days and days he sailed to the east, alone on the ocean with little to guide him. He followed the sun, and the stars at night, till his water and food ran low. But he still went on with nothing to eat, for he knew what would happen to Branwen if he didn't.

At last he saw land not far in the distance, the first that he'd seen since leaving the castle. Then he sailed for the shore, for he was starving and weak, and unless he found food very soon he was lost.

The minute he stepped on the beach that evening there appeared a white hound who fell at his feet. The dog barked and panted and snuffled his toes, and at last Brandon laughed at its playfulness. Then the dog jumped up and ran a short way, and looked back and waited while it wagged its long tail.

"Maybe this dog was sent here today to lead me some place I should go," Brandon thought to himself. So he followed the dog to an old wooden house, where he found a long table set full of good food. There was no one to be seen, and no one came when he called. Just the dog, who sat and watched him and licked its black lips.

So Brandon ate and drank as much as he wished, and he was thankful indeed. When he finished his food, the dog led him to a bed with the covers turned down, and there he slept until morning.

As soon as the sky turned pale he ate once again from the table, but he took nothing with him from there. The dog growled when he tried, and wouldn't allow it. So he returned to the ship, and the dog came with him, and together they followed the shore of this new land he had found.

Green pastures and meadows stretched far out of sight, and grazing on the hills were herds of white sheep. Each of those sheep was the size of a horse, and their wool was white as snow. They looked up at Brandon and bleated and stamped as he passed, the most beautiful animals that he ever saw.

At mid-afternoon he spied an old shepherd, who called to the ship and bid Brandon welcome. His hair was as white as the wool of the sheep, and Brandon went ashore to speak to him.

"This is the Island of Sheep," the man said, "and here it's never cold but always summer. So the sheep grow large and whiter than snow, because they eat the best grass that grows anywhere."

And the old man gave him food and warm clothes to take with him, and water to last him for a trip of many days, for he said that the land would soon come to an end.

So it did, and before long Brandon left the Island of Sheep behind him, and headed out again across the sea. Near the end of the day he came to a place of sharp rocks and shallow water, and he was afraid if he went on then the ship might be wrecked in the dark. But he saw a black rock that stood taller than most, and he anchored his ship beside it for the night. He ate a cold supper of dried meat and goat cheese, and next morning set out once again.

The sky was dark and cloudy when the sun rose, and Brandon had barely escaped from the sharp shallow rocks before a storm swept him up in its fury. The wind and the waves were terrible to see, and he dared not sleep for a second. It was three full days till he reached land again, so exhausted by then that he could barely hold the sail. The ship ran aground on a sand bar in the dark, and the wind and the waves howled and swirled all around him.

When the storm died away about noon the next day, then he gathered his strength to explore this new land and see what there was to see. The first thing he found was two stone wells at the edge of the woods, with the grass clipped and neat all around them. Out of one there flowed water so pure and so clear that Brandon had never seen the like of it. From the other came a stream somewhat cloudy and dark. He drank from the clear

one, and it was icy cold in his mouth. Then he looked at the sand bar with a frown. The boat was aground, and he knew he was stranded, for one man alone lacked the strength to push it free.

“But if I wait just a while then the Lord will provide,” he said to himself, and sat down on a rock to rest. The snow-white dog came and licked his hand, and then it lay down beside him to wait.

Before long a young man came to the well to fetch water, and he saw them both sitting there and took pity. For Brandon was dirty and salty and exhausted, and his eyes were dull from not sleeping.

The young man led him down a path to a monastery, which was hidden in the woods nearby. When they got there he was greeted by twenty-four monks, all of them clothed in scarlet and gold. The abbot sat Brandon on a hard wooden bench, and washed his sore feet with warm water. The monks washed the sea salt from his skin and his hair, and gave him clean clothes to put on. Then they took him to a place full of tables and chairs, and they all had supper together. Each monk at the table had a loaf of warm bread, and a bowl of white roots which tasted delicious, but Brandon didn't know of what kind they might be. They drank nothing but water from the first clear well. Brandon had eaten nothing for days but dried meat and cheese, and the food he got now was wonderful, he thought.

Brandon stayed with the monks for two or three days till he was rested and strong once again. Then he knew it was time to move on, for he didn't dare wait for too long. The monks worked together to push the ship off the sand, and he thanked them very deeply before leaving.

Not long after that came a huge fish that followed him, spitting streams of salty water at the ship. The water came so fast that Brandon nearly drowned, and he could barely keep the ship from sinking. But the white-furred dog didn't fear the huge fish, and he jumped in the sea with a snarl. The dog and the fish fought viciously for a while, but at last the white dog tore the fish into pieces, and swam back to sit at Brandon's side.

The next day they came to a region of darkness, where the air was full of foul smells and black smoke. Brandon heard cruel horns blasting far off in the dark, but he couldn't see a thing past the front of the boat, not even in the middle of the day. He was more afraid of this than of anything so far, but he knew in his heart there was no other way.

He sailed for hours through the smothering darkness, and he could barely even breathe for the smoke and the fumes. Then far in the distance he saw an island full of flames.

When he passed close by then a demon rushed out, and he stared at Brandon with huge bulging eyes. He turned toward the island and called to some others, the most horrible cry that could ever be imagined.

Soon there came more demons who rushed across the sea, with sharp hooks and hammers of burning iron in their hands. They ran on the water as if it were land, and it seemed like the whole sea was on fire. The things roared and snarled and threw their weapons at the ship, and they sizzled and splashed in the sea all around.

Brandon was in terror at first, and he covered his eyes from the hideous sight, but he soon found the demons couldn't hurt him. All they could do was threaten and roar, and their power came only through the terror they caused. So Brandon took courage, and pretended they didn't exist.

When the demons discovered that he no longer feared them, they gave up the ghost and went home.

Then Brandon sailed on for seven more days, and soon the darkness gave way to heavy fog mixed with sleet. The fog was so thick that he still couldn't see, not even the sun in the sky, and at last he was hopelessly lost. He couldn't even be sure which direction was home. All he could do was pray for God to lead him through, for he knew he could never find the way by himself.

Then at last the gray fog finally lifted, and Brandon could see where he was once more. The sea all around him was smooth and glassy as crystal, and not far to the east lay a silent shore.

The earth of that land shined as bright as the sun, and the stones on the ground were of diamond and pearl. Each meadow was full of gold flowers and trees, and all of the trees in that land bore fruit. The breeze brought a scent of those meadows to his ship, and tears filled his eyes and his breath nearly stopped, for nothing more beautiful could there be.

Then Brandon set foot on the bright shining beach, and before long there came to him a handsome young man, whose face shone with light.

"Be glad now, Brandon, for this is the land you've been searching for. You stand on the edge of the Land of Eden, where Adam and Eve first lived, till they broke the commandment of God. The fruit that you see is ripe all year, and the light never ceases to shine. Come in," he invited.

And Brandon smiled, and walked into Eden, and there the man left him alone. Then he wandered for a while through the meadows and woods, but he never reached the end of that land. Everything was lit in a changeless day, and it seemed to be always

spring. At the last he came to a clear flowing river, but he dared not cross over, for he felt in his heart it was forbidden. Then the handsome young man came again.

“This river you see divides all things in two. On the far side there grows on the highest hill the Tree of Life in eternal bloom, and no one can cross over while he is still alive. Therefore take now a fruit from one of these other trees, and depart in peace, and sail once again to your home.”

Then Brandon plucked a fruit from the tree that grew closest, and he wept as he boarded his ship once again, for he knew he could never forget that place.

He sailed to the west, and not very long afterward he reached the Cambrian shore, although he barely remembered the trip. Then the people of the castle were glad, but confused, for they said he'd been gone just three days. And Brandon could hardly believe it. Then he told them the story of his journey on the sea, and all the wonderful things that he'd seen.

“I've walked in a land that shines like the sun, and stood by the river of Eden,” he told them, and no one could doubt it, for his clothes still smelled of that beautiful place.

From that day onward, wherever he went, he was called Bran the Blessed by his people, the name he was given in Eyre. For no other man walked so close with God as Brandon, whose feet had once stood in the meadows of Eden, and who had breathed for a while the clean air of that place.

The fruit which he brought from that shining land he took to his sister in her bed. And she smiled when she saw him, through the pain in her eyes.

“I knew you'd come,” she whispered.

“The way was long, but now eat and be well,” he told her. Then Branwen ate the fruit from his hand, and the pain slowly vanished from her eyes. She rose to her feet, whole and healthy again, and her beauty was no less than before, for sorrow and wisdom had deepened it. Then she kissed her brother and held him tight, and together they left the old castle.

The new King of Eyre was a righteous young man, and the war that was feared never came. For the tale of Bran the Blessed was repeated far and wide among the people of Eyre and Cambria, and they never grew tired of hearing it. And for love of Brandon, the people of both lands swore never to make war on each other again.

Then Bran the Blessed and Branwen the Fair lived a long life in peace, and they were honored by their people.

And in all the time since, there has never been another like Brandon. No one in all the land of Cambria has ever been so faithful and true, nor so blessed and brave as he was, and he is remembered with love even to this day.

