

## THE TRAVELER

Beneath the cat willow, in autumn and at night, the four men slept. Morning came and they got up and walked in the direction of the merchant city at the river's end. Along the way, one man picked up and threw flat pebbles into the water and cursed at someone not present. He tried skipping the stones for so long and stopped when he decided he was no good at skipping stones, and started again when he had made up his mind about it. One man, closer to the front of the line, looked at the back of another one's head, which was bald and cancerous. The one with the bald and cancerous head looked at his feet and considered his steps. The final man, walking in front, whistled. Some times he looked into the water to his right and others he looked ahead, always whistling. Others he stopped whistling to speak to someone behind him. He was having a conversation with the man in back, who was and still is the stone-thrower.

"This seems odd," the whistler said.

"What's this?" said the stone-thrower.

"We're going in a circle. I saw those trees yesterday morning." The whistler pointed to some maples across the river.

And the man second from the front with the bald head said, "This river is a straight line to the city," and that was the last thing he said that day.

"Then the city must be farther than I thought," the man in front, the whistler, said. "I don't like these trees all looking the same." The man third in line, who was looking at the bald man's head, nodded.

The man in front thought of what he might do in the city. He might trade in his shoes for some food and walk a few days to the portside city and there he will work a few days more to buy shoes and then take a boat.

Then the man who was throwing stones tossed at the water, and mid-air he called out, "No!"

"What's the matter, stone-thrower?" one man said.

The stone-thrower stopped walking. When nobody else stopped, he called over, "I picked up a diamond ring just now. Swear to you, I just picked up a diamond ring."

The whistler stopped when he heard this, and when he stopped so did the others.

“Where is it?”

“It’s in the water.”

“Well, why don’t you get it?”

“I will.”

The stone-thrower got down on his knees and stepped one foot then the other into the water, which was up to his knees. He stayed there with his hands and knees submerged until night, when he said to no one in particular, “My back hurts.” Then he left the river, whose water had risen by that time to the height of a brook, around to his hips, and had gotten colder.

“There’s a strange taste in my mouth,” he said, removing the first shoe.

One of the other’s said, “It’s river water.”

“Yeah, that must be it.”

The other men, except for the bald-headed man, told stories they’d heard while the stone-thrower was in water. He sat beside them on the grass and the men stopped talking.

“You didn’t find it?” said the man who was before whistling.

The stone-thrower couldn’t see in the water, and after about an hour trying he couldn’t feel because his hands had numbed from the cold. All he said was, “My feet were all over the bottom. I hope I didn’t push it deeper.” To the others, this meant he gave up.

The man with the bald head pulled a large burlap sack from his bag and draped it over and within five minutes he had found a good position and fallen asleep.

The others stayed up talking and fell asleep not too long after.

Night was full of mosquitoes. The man in front woke a few times with one on his face and slapped it and fell back asleep. He was glad he decided not to trade his coat at the next city. Then he would get bites all over the next time he slept outdoors. He would have slept in his shoes, since he had no socks, but decided to put them by his side, to harden up his feet for the coming days.

The men all dreamt of chivalry and women.

Morning came a second time one. One man was missing. They didn’t know each other’s names, so the whistler said, “Where’s the stone-thrower?” His arms suddenly itched all over, then he said, “Where’s all our blankets?”

The stone-thrower had taken with him three burlap fabrics and one pair of shoes. The other men got up and each looked through his own bag. Their food was missing.

“We’d better get going,” said the whistler. “It’s about time I eat.”

The others agreed and followed him along the river.

No one talked for some hours. Then the bald man said, “It’s getting pretty windy.” The mute tapped both men on the backs and pointed up at the sky, and clapped and made crashing gestures with his palms. The other two agreed, so they kept walking along the river, looking for a big tree to stay under. When they found the tree it was getting dark and none of them had eaten, so the whistler offered to go look for something. He took a long narrow knife from his sack and the others slept, expecting he would wake them when he returned. He didn’t return that night.

The storm was thick and took off many leaves from the tree. Early morning, before the sun rose and when the birds usually would be just starting to call to each other, a heavy branch blew off the tree and fell on the mute’s head and killed him. The branch fell with such force that after hitting the mute it rolled ten or more feet into the river. Being used to the sounds of a storm around him, the bald-headed man did not wake during this. A short time after, the whistler returned with a jackrabbit. It was still dark, so he lay down as soon as he located the correct tree and hung the animal’s torso over a nearby branch.

Sun rose and the bald-headed man woke and found the mute dead. By the looks of the leaves around and the impact mark in the dirt at his side, a branch had hit him. But there was no descent branch nearby so the bald-headed man expected a person had killed the mute while they slept and maybe hit him with a log to fake an accident. The bald-headed man examined the mute’s sack for clues. The whistler awoke just then and said, “What are you doing?” Then the whistler saw the mute’s body and said nothing else. He thought first the obvious and easy thing to think, then considered the less obvious and more comforting thing, then believed the easy thing because this was no time for playing with logic.

The bald-headed man took his time before answering and when he did he spoke with hesitation.

“I found our companion dead and started looking in his bag for clues. You can see there it was probably a tree branch that killed him, but I wanted to make sure no one came in the night and killed and robbed him.”

The whistler nodded.

“I don’t think there’s anything missing,” the bald-headed man said. “This looks like a well-packed bag.” By this he meant that for any one thing to be added or removed the sack would immediately become a confusing assortment of objects.

They walked along the river in their original direction.

A few hours into walking, a noise came from behind. Both men withdrew their knives and turned and held them in front. It was the stone-thrower. His clothes were ruined from the storm, and he carried nothing with him. The whistler did not think to ask where his burlap sack was as it was obvious the stone-thrower didn’t have it, and that even if he knew where it was the trouble would probably be immense in retrieving it.

The stone-thrower said, “Please, give me food. Give me food or I will die.” The men looked at each other and, for the betterment of their relationship and maybe for other reasons, too, decided the stone-thrower was the mute’s killer. They charged and screamed and within a minute the stone-thrower was dead.

At the last second, the bald-headed man decided he could not kill the stone-thrower. The whistler did the final deed.

“Where were you last night?” the bald-headed man asked after the whistler had finished killing the stone-thrower. “We fell asleep and you were still out.”

The whistler pointed to the jackrabbit hung over the tree branch and the bald-headed man nodded as if he had been silly to ask. After this exchange was complete, the whistler took the rabbit by its feet, faced the bank, stepped back, got a running start, and jumped across. At the other side, he asked the bald-headed man to follow.

“This is a straight line to the city,” the bald-headed man said. “Why would we deviate now when we’re so close?”

Just then, the whistler considered for a moment the possibility that the river was a circle so large that at any given point it seemed to be a straight line. This would explain why he had noticed trees repeating. So the two men continued along the river in the direction they were headed, one man on either side, until they reached the tree with the mute’s body. Then the whistler ran into the woods, and the bald-headed man jumped the river and ran after him. The bald-headed man eventually caught up with the whistler and tackled him to the ground in a small clearing. They

fought and at the end of fighting the whistler bashed the bald-headed man's head against a tree root and ran deeper into the woods. After a short while he stopped running, because he noticed the bald-headed man was not behind. At night, the whistler slept beneath a tall cat willow. When morning came he said a prayer to the mute, the stone-thrower and the bald-headed man, and kept walking along his path until he could see the city.

That morning the bald-headed man awoke and on his forehead was dried blood and some dirt. He continued in the direction the whistler had gone, passing through the trees the height of which he had never seen, and every now and then he reached a small clearing and stopped to look around. He saw a few deer, and once a wedge in a tree where a man had started hacking. At another point he found a large bag on the ground, which he realized belonged to one of the men he was with, but he did not know who. He saw the ground roughed up near the bag so he took the bag without looking inside and went that way. Some minutes later he saw a man many yards away. This man who was many yards away, upon seeing the bald-headed man, ran screaming toward him. The bald-headed man was planning to dodge out of the way just before the charging man had reached him, then hit him on the head and run off. The running man stopped suddenly a few yards in front.

"Don't mind me," the man said. "I've gone mad because I haven't eaten in days. If you'll give me food I'll do you a favor, although I don't now know what I'll do."

The bald-headed man opened the large bag and noticed the missing food was inside and handed half a bread loaf to the mad man, who took and ate it and lay down on the ground, because eating quickly and after so long without food he had given himself a stomachache.

Also inside the bag were three burlap sacks rolled up and a knife.

After maybe a half hour of lying there, the mad man sat up slowly, saw the bald-headed man's bag and said, "That's mine."

"This bag belongs to a companion of mine." The mad man did not answer. "Did you take this from him?" Again the mad man did not answer.

"You have a strange way of things," the bald-headed man said, and withdrew the knife and before the mad man could act he hit the butt against the mad man's head and he slouched over onto the grass. The bald-headed man then followed some footsteps into a clearing.