

The Race Goes to the Swiftest

In the beginning they told us adversity would make us strong. It made sense to us, like exercise in the gymnasium. Hard work made you strong. Everyone knew this. So we suffered adversity, knowing a better time was coming, and that we would be able to enjoy it more when it came because we had been strong. We hadn't cowered or quit.

Our lives were difficult at the start, but we did not falter. We had the minds of men on tightropes. The winds blew hard, coming from one direction one day and from another the next. But the rope led to a magnificent destination, of that we were sure. So as the winds blew, hard one moment then softly the next, we pressed ahead, mostly taking shorter steps, a trembling advance, like men with rickets.

In the distance beyond, we could hear music and laughter. Perhaps they had heard of our ordeal, had invited guests to celebrate our fortitude, our early advance. Or perhaps no one had heard of us, and what we were hearing was a celebration for someone else. Perhaps our beliefs were naive, our efforts meaningless, our peril really of no concern to anyone but ourselves. Such thoughts invaded the mind of each man, and got in further with some than with others. Soon these thoughts became disturbing. We had to try to manage each other's despair, also the occasional furious outburst.

A sense of revolt rose up in some, a heartfelt desire to force a transparent accounting of our situation. What would our efforts gain us, exactly?, some of us wanted to ask. Was there a plan we could review, someone who could explain a timetable, give us the straightforward what-for-what? We debated whom to contact, how to get word out about our worsening mental condition, though there was no doubt that most of us were strong and determined men. We were doing our part, even though some had misgivings. We sent a man out to make contact with the directors. He didn't return.

One day a message came. Be patient, it said. A description of the heaven we were meant for was included, a truly beautiful landscape of tranquility and fulfillment. The author told us he was sympathetic to our plight and its unanticipated duration. He said others were suffering to a greater degree, because they were not strong. Our time was coming, he said, and he was doing all he could to make the path easier. Our food,

he said, would be improved. It would make things easier. It would make us happier.

We felt good again. Trust had been reestablished between us and the ones who, someone said, were calling the shots. And, once again, heaven seemed not far off. We could see the outline of it once again. Before, we'd felt a strong need for each other's company and a desire to help those most susceptible to doubt. But the food had made each one of us livelier, more positive. We were stronger in our minds now. We had a good orientation toward the future and believed more strongly in our capabilities. When we heard the music and laughter again, out there ahead of us, we no longer thought these were people living lives separate from ours, people on a less demanding path, but instead, people who had already arrived in heaven, people celebrating their success, enjoying the fruits of their labor.

We felt good. And when the old puzzlements returned for a few, when doubt surfaced, some of us chose to hold on to these good feelings, the feelings that came from eating better food, and to not risk losing those feelings by becoming too much involved with the doubters. We were less dependent now, each man more or less for himself. The journey to heaven would be shorter for several of us this way. Some of the group fell behind. We did not see them later. But the journey was still good. The food, healthy exercise, everything, it seemed, had been provided. For those of us running strongly in the front, this was as it should be, the natural way of things. The strong finish the race, and the weak fall behind and are not heard from again.

Things were good. The weather was good. Everything gave us a lift. The road definitely was shortening, the end of our beautiful journey not very far off now. In a short time we would be in paradise. But then one day someone's hands fell off. Of course you do not need your hands to run, and you can feed yourself with your feet, but still, it was a little strange. Adversity. We were accustomed to this. It made us strong, really.

Several more lost one or both hands. The consensus among those who had not lost a hand, or two, was that those without hands needed to learn from each other how to feed themselves with their feet. The rest should not be asked to help. The road was now short, certainly. Somehow the rest would make it. We would be waiting for them. New hands were easily had in heaven. Then people lost their arms. Then one day a man lost a foot. He could only hop. The pace the rest of us set was ardent. Strenuous. The one-foot man could not keep up.

One day, those of us in the front noticed a change of color in the air, yellow to blue, brown to white. The colors of the old sky. Yes, we were close, no doubt of it now. Some continued to lose an arm, a foot, to fall back. One of the leaders said maybe it was the food, the food possibly wasn't good for us anymore. We should be eating something else. Or not eating at all. The laughter, the sound of carrying on, was louder now. It could not be much farther. Some began to fast. The fasting cleared our minds of doubt, which once again was assailing us all. In the beginning, those fasting experienced headaches, pain so deep it dropped us to our knees. A few in the group, among the first to start fasting, were driven to the ground by blades of pain so staggering they lay there and didn't get up.

A landscape like none any of us had ever seen or imagined hove into view. The near improbability of this slowed those of us left to a walk. With the headaches like nails pounded through our skulls, we came to the end of the path. It finished in openness, like a promontory meeting the expanse of the naked ocean. Light shifting on the moving surface threw up ephemera, scenes we took to be hints of Elysium, from what we'd read and heard. From the ephemera came the sounds of music and laughter.

We stood on the promontory, holding our heads askew against the piercing headaches, wondering, what now? We had completed the journey. We had met the terms of the agreement each of us had agreed to, so long ago, though no one could actually remember when that was. Otherwise, why were we standing here at the path's end? In the play of light, amid these ephemera of Elysium, we caught glimpses of several people we recognized, men we had worked for. Men we had voted for. Important people we'd placed our confidence in. They had made it; that was good. Though no one could recall any details about what was good in these men we'd served and promoted. We agreed, however—and this was indisputable—that they had done things correctly because they were here in the Elysium described to us.

After a while the headaches went away. There was no food. We sat on either side of the path. We heard the music and the laughter and saw the flickering of pale light. We speculated about the meaning of the words that came to us from time to time on the air. What was the gist of them? What was actually meant? What were the sources of the music and laughter?