

Passing Through the Steppe

It was time to leave, I knew that much. I also knew that without help I would never find my way out of that endless savanna with its ever receding horizon and countless footpaths branching in all directions. The locals put me in touch with a man whose name I couldn't pronounce, a nomadic herdsman. Robed in a long coat woven of thick lamb's wool and adorned with red, green, yellow and blue stripes, he shook my hand and asked me where I hoped to go. Calm dark eyes and salt-and-pepper beard imparted wisdom to his face. This, and his colorful coat, brought to mind Joseph, of Biblical lore.

Two, maybe three of his fellow herdsmen, all wearing similar long, multi-colored coats, walked silently into the green marshland that spread before us as far as I could see. Without speaking, they stepped into the tall reeds and I thought (irrelevantly), is this papyrus?

The marsh water was warm, ankle-deep at first, then shin-deep, then knee-deep. The lead herdsman—I'll call him Joseph because I'd forgotten his actual name—waded into chest-deep waters. Evidently this was to be our mode of travel: we would swim to our destination.

I pushed forward into the mild water, leaning my face close to pale green fronds swirling about me. It's difficult to say with any certainty how long we breast-stroked through that boundless marsh. It could have been days, weeks, months, it hardly matters anymore.

Eventually we reached a place consisting of little more than two or three rough huts. During our journey it became apparent that Joseph had come down with a fever, so he stayed behind where he was ordered to wait inside a pillbox-shaped hut of rust-colored clay.

Joseph looked worn down with sadness. I asked him if there was a doctor there who could help him.

“I’m afraid there is very little a doctor can do for me,” he said. “I fear it is too late.” He spoke with such resignation, he would not look me in the eye.

I wanted to offer him some hope, some encouragement. “Surely *something* can be done.”

“I don’t think so” he said, and turned to me.

It was then I saw that his eyeballs had swollen grotesquely in his face. His eyes were puffed up to the size of ripe plums about to pop out of his head. The irises, which were deep brown when I met him, were now a murky grey-blue. Flecked all over the surface of his eyeballs were tiny red growths. These hair-like, fuzzy appendages looked like dendrites or branches. They stuck out two or three inches beyond the curvature of his eyeballs and prevented his eyelids from blinking. The tiny, wispy, red branches protruding from his eyes looked like they were vibrating ever so slightly, as if grasping at the warm wind rising from the darkening village.

It was clear that for the rest of the journey I would have to find my way alone.

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