



Boy-Man and Man-Boy

Jonathan Tjioe

Fable, Historical, Mystery

Part I

Once upon a time, on a drab, dreary, and dull day, a boy called Velho awoke. He stretched in the moss-covered alcove in which he had spent the night and sat up. Velho patted around for his pack, a little sack made entirely of a single square piece of cloth, holding within it all his worldly possessions. Velho was young, oh yes, on the cusp of the age of awkward timing and urges, but he knew how to take care of himself, that he did. He emerged from the recess into the grey world beyond, all the more colourless when compared to the gleeful orange that had filled the night before. Velho shouldered his bundle, a world-weary traveller, and set off on his journey. He spat derisively into the ash that lined the side of the road as he passed.

He walked for as long as his legs and feet – grown strong and calloused by years of running away barefoot – would allow him. Tired, he stopped by a stream to drink. As he knelt before the crystal waters, he heard a small, singsong voice ask, “Who are you? What are you doing?”

Still as a statue, Velho slowly turned his head. The child-like voice belonged to a man of middle age. He was a large bear of a man, with a head that looked almost comically small on such a body. Also, he was completely filthy, and his clothes, what was left of them, looked like a patchwork of holey vestments.

Velho simply turned back to his task, cupping his hands in the water and bringing it up to his mouth, with motions as slow and as deliberate as time ticking. He could hear the man’s shallow breathing and nervous shuffling of his feet. Finished, his thirst quenched, he calmly stood and replied, with a voice born of volcanoes, a voice impossibly deep and harsh from such a young throat, “I am Velho, and I am drinking water.”

The man clapped his hands excitedly, a grin breaking across his lined face, and he danced a little jig. “Velho! I am Jovem! Why were you drinking water?” Jovem asked earnestly.

Velho looked steadily at the strange man and answered, “Because I was thirsty.”

“I’m thirsty too!” And saying that, Jovem flopped onto the ground beside Velho and tried to drink from the stream in the same way Velho had. But Jovem simply could not do it. He would spill the water from his hands before he could bring it to his lips. He looked up at Velho, with tears welling up in his eyes and a tremble in his upper lip. Velho said nothing, and in his steadfast manner, showed Jovem how to do it properly and carefully.

Jovem was delighted, but in his enthusiasm, fell into the stream. The river was thankfully shallow, and he soon found his feet albeit for a great deal of sputtering. With a ghost of a smile upon his lips (even that a rare sight indeed), Velho commented, “Since you are already wet, this may be a good time for a bath.”

“Bath! I like baths!” laughed Jovem. When they were done, Jovem scrubbed clean and pink as a new-born babe, they sat companionably as they waited for their clothes to dry.

“Where are you going, Velho?” asked Jovem.

At this, it was as if a door had slammed shut. Velho became expressionless, and replied curtly, “Why should I tell you?”

Jovem was startled at this sudden change, and started to cry in great heaving sobs. “I... I just wanted to know! I think I am lost...”

Seeing this big man hunched over and rocking with his face buried in his arms and legs drawn up to his chest, hearing his pained moans, Velho felt something in him break. His voice, when it emerged, was nothing like what it was before; it was like a vast lake, deep yet tranquil and soothing. “Listen Jovem,” he hesitated, “I am on a journey to find a Father. You – “

It was as if he had never been crying in the first place. Jovem instantly brightened up and exclaimed to Velho, “Yes! I remember now! I am on a journey to find a Son! Where are you going to find your Father? Can I follow you?” Noticing Velho’s face, he asked worriedly, “What’s wrong Velho? Did you eat something bad?”

“No, I am fine,” Velho replied in a strangled voice. “And no I don’t know where I am going; I don’t care.”

“Then let me ask the Wind! He’ll know where to go!” He leapt to his feet, closed his eyes, and cupped his hand to his ear. “O Wind, O Wind, where should we go to find our treasure?”

Now, Velho was a very serious boy, but the sight of this man trying to talk to the wind, leaning to one side with his hand behind his ear, of the solemnity in the cast of his face, made him chuckle. “Quiet!” hissed Jovem. Shaking his head, still smiling, Velho tried, but all he could hear was the mild whisper of the wind rustling his hair.

“Yes! Thank you, O Wind, we shall set off right away! Did you hear what the Wind said?” he asked, turning to Velho.

“Yes, he told me I was a prince, and that my father was the king of a thousand thousand men.” Velho replied mockingly.

“Really? The Wind told me that we need only follow this road, and that we would find our treasure at the Circus!” said Jovem, looking pleased with himself.

“Of course not, Jovem, I am not a prince, and my father was most definitely not a king, or why would I be looking for one now? How could the Wind possibly speak?” replied Velho with some heat in his voice.

Velho thought that Jovem would become upset, would begin to cry like he had before, but instead a serenity stole upon him and he said, “No, the Wind can speak. You just don’t know how to listen.” Velho stared at him, and all at once, the serenity that illuminated Jovem slipped away. “Let’s go!” cried Jovem and he ran off down the road, looking back, expecting Velho to follow.

Velho sighed and muttered under his breath, “He could try putting his clothes on first.”

Part II

And so, Velho and Jovem travelled together on the long, winding path. Velho with his steady, measured, pace and Jovem at times running ahead, trudging behind when he was tired, prone to chasing after the things that caught his attention.

Eventually, they came upon a merchant hawking his wares. The pair could hear him shouting, “The finest silks!

The most exquisite gems! The most interesting trinkets! Gather round, one and all!" More importantly however, was the smell. They could smell the aroma of freshly baked bread, the heady fragrance of cooked meat grilled to perfection. Instantly, their hunger was upon them, for they had not realised just how long it had been since they last ate.

They approached the merchant's stall, mouths watering. The merchant was a morbidly obese man, with a head so bald and round that it looked like a large crystal ball. He looked like a snowman swathed in many folds of multi-coloured scarves, only a snowman would have melted while he sweated profusely.

With Jovem beside him, Velho caught the merchant's attention. "Please sir, may we have some food?" he asked politely.

The merchant, looking them up and down, sneered at them. "Well, my young lad, do you have any money? Perhaps you may have something of worth in that tiny sack of yours? Or maybe that oaf you have with you has a hidden hoard that I do not see?"

"Please sir, we are very hungry. He may be simple, but he is strong, as am I. We are willing to work to earn our keep," Velho replied calmly.

"Ha!" laughed the merchant. "Work? What do you take me, the Great Lille Trille, for? Workers I have pl—" At this moment, Jovem, who had been entranced by a bauble that shimmered with different colours depending on how the light struck it, cautiously put his hand upon it. The merchant flew into a rage, and withdrawing a cane from under the table, hit Jovem's hand with it. "You dare! You dare sully my wares!"

In shock, Jovem snatched his hand back, a red welt already forming. But this caused the bauble to fall and shatter on the ground in a million sparkling pieces. Jovem looked from the broken crystal to the merchant in stunned silence. His wail, when it came, was like an avalanche, unstoppable and all-consuming. He turned and ran down the road, holding his hand. Velho fixed the merchant with a stare, and wordlessly left to follow Jovem.

When he had caught up to Jovem, he found him curled up and sobbing quietly. Velho approached slowly, not wanting to upset Jovem any more. Jovem, noticing that Velho had come up to him, slowly unfurled himself. "Why?" was the single plaintive question.

"Because they can," was Velho's reply. "Come Jovem, let us make a fire for the night, and then, I will hunt for

us.”

And so, the companions let the task consume them, and come the twilight, Velho told Jovem to keep watch, and that he would return forthwith. And just before night truly fell to blanket the world in darkness, Velho returned. From his sack, that he had brought with him on his hunt, spilled forth skewered meats, candied apples, and many other such treasures.

Jovem was overjoyed to see Velho returned, and Velho smiled at seeing the pleasure that Jovem took from eating. That easy smile slid away however, when Jovem innocuously asked, “How did you find all this, Velho?”

Velho was silent for a time. Then “Would you like a story, Jovem?”

“Oh, yes please! I love stories!”

“Alright, then. One day, Spot, a magic dog, came across an egg. The egg was huge, but it had a lock in its centre. The lock had no key; it seemed that one would need to enter the correct combination of symbols into the lock. But try as he might, nothing he did seemed to work. He tried all day and all night, but still he could not open the lock to see what lay inside the egg. Eventually, he gave up, laying panting on the ground. It was then that a young boy came up to him and asked him what he was doing. ‘O child, it is this egg!’ the dog exclaimed, ‘nothing I do can possibly make this lock open, and I am ever so curious as to what is within!’

The boy looked at the lock, and at the state of the dog. ‘I know what to do,’ he said quietly. ‘Watch’. And so saying, the boy took up a sizeable tree branch, and with a mighty swing, cracked the egg open. The dog was shocked, and asked the boy, ‘Why would you do that?’

The boy simply replied, ‘Because what else was there to be done?’ And with that, he walked away.”

Jovem, who had been listening intently until now, had a sad look on his face. “Do you think the egg can be fixed, Velho?”

Velho smiled, this time a private smile, a smile of broken glass and dreams, and said, “I don’t think so, Jovem.”

Jovem then lit up, and said, “I know! Why not stick the pieces back together?”

“And how would you do that, Jovem?”

“Well, honey is gold and sweet and nice, and when it dries it becomes hard! So with lots of honey, and lots of

time, you'll be able to put it back together again!" Jovem beamed, looking extremely pleased with himself.

When Velho said nothing, Jovem was concerned. "Are you alright, Velho? Are you still hungry?"

Velho started, the strange look on his face cracking, and said "I am fine, Jovem. Let us sleep. We still have a circus to find. Good night."

"Good night, Velho!"

Part III

The next day found our companions continuing their travels. This day was thankfully uneventful, but for an increase in the traffic on the road. It seemed that they were on the right way. There were trundling carts full of all sorts of foods, food that they had never seen before, and kindly, jovial people who were willing to share. There were travelling magicians and jesters on their way to the circus, and they gladly entertained Jovem and Velho whenever they happened to rest together.

As evening fell, they prepared their fire, and readied for the night. It was then, as they had just gotten the fire crackling, they heard a pitiful squealing not far from where they were. As Velho tended to the fire, Jovem went to find the source of the sound.

"What is that you have there, Jovem?" asked Velho as Jovem returned.

Wordlessly, with tears in his eyes, Jovem simply held out his huge hands. Lying within was a pure white rabbit, still making small noises of pain and fear. It was clear that it had a broken leg. "Can we make it better?"

Inspecting it, Velho shook his head slowly. "I am sorry, Jovem. But there is nothing to be done. We cannot heal it, and if we leave it be, it will surely be eaten by others. Best that it at least serves a purpose in filling our stomachs. At least we can make it quick. Do you want me to do it?"

Jovem recoiled, horror in his face. "No! Please! It's just not well! It will be fine!" However, this involuntary action only served to injure the rabbit further, and it squealed even more shrilly than before. Jovem dropped to his knees, hanging his head and sobbing openly now, his tears wetting the rabbit's fur.

Gently, Velho knelt and put his hand on Jovem's shoulder. "I will do it," Jovem suddenly said. "There is a song I used to sing, back when I still had my sons." Jovem cocked his head back as far as it could, with his eyes closed,

and sang. His voice, a light-filled, rich, sparkling tenor filled the night sky. It was a prayer, an old, old prayer, of loss and lament and return. And when he was done, as his hands lay limp and the rabbit now quiet, Velho took the rabbit gently from him. It was as if the song had taken all he had. And as he wrung the rabbit's neck in one quick motion, Velho, in his own bass of stone, completed it: "for ashes we are, and to ashes we return."

The next morning, having scattered the remains of the fire, they continued their journey. Though the weather was bright and the wind was light, it was a solemn procession. They each knew that the end was in sight. They could see the tentage of the Circus slowly rising before them as they approached. Now, finally, they stood before it, mingling with the excited crowd as they waited for the Circus to open. The Ringmaster climbed atop a raised platform, drawing cheers from the crowd. "Welcome! We welcome you to our kingdom, to our magic domain! We are you, and you are us!" At this, the crowd gasped and broke into sections as jesters, jugglers, fire-dancers, gymnasts revealed themselves within the crowd. "But," said the Ringmaster, "today we have very special guests. Behold!" At the Ringmaster's gesture, the people of the circus cleared a path in the middle of the crowd, leading directly to the entrance of the tent.

The crowd, seeing the people who approached, gasped collectively and began cheering wildly. Even through the deafening noise, the Ringmaster's stentorian voice still rang clearly. "Our esteemed guests! Please welcome, the King! The Pope!" And amid the ocean of applause, whoops, and chants, the grand procession disappeared one after another, the flap of the tent's entrance swallowing the King, the Pope, and their entourage. The attraction over, people began to file in, vanishing into the maw of the Circus until only Velho and Jovem were left outside.

Standing before the entrance, Jovem, who had been watching the festivities silently, suddenly spoke. "Do you think we will really find what we were looking for, Velho? Was the Wind right?" he said, his voice quavering. Velho simply put his hand to his ear, and listened. Smiling, he took Jovem's hand in his own, and said, "We may already have, Jovem. And the Wind was most definitely right."

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