

From the September 4, 2009 Issue

## Short Story: The Man in the Robe

The man in the robe made a lonely scene, trekking over the barren plain under the noonday sun. He had come a long way from the city. His coarse, brown robe flapped against his skinny legs as his worn leather sandals crunched their way across the pale gravel. Far away was the blue wall of a mountain; closer, a few boulders of indeterminate size. Above, a cloudless sky of pale, white-hot blue.

Even the suburbs of the city, filled with jealousy and yelling as they were, would have been welcome to him now. His pack seemed impossibly heavy after so long a walk in such a wasteland. The water from the city's river that had filled his canteen that morning was gone now. Only the box remained, yet its weight seemed to grow with each step.

At last he saw the shimmering pool of water that he had expected for the last hour. Even in this vast nothingness that pool was there - not a mirage, but a real rest. He half fell, half knelt as he bent to scoop up water and drink. This was the half-way point. He rested quietly for a while, eyes closed. There was no sound, no wind, no one. Who knows how long he sat? It was always noon in that wilderness. At last the box impressed itself upon his mind and seemed to rouse him. He set off again on his journey.

Finally he could see the tent in the distance. A single black spot in the chalky white dirt of the desert. It grew imperceptibly larger with his every step, until at last he could distinguish a second black dot next to it. The man in the tent had seen him coming from far away and had come out to greet him.

Neither man spoke or waved until the man in the robe stood directly in front of the man in the tent. In all that long approach the two just looked at each other - the man in the robe walking, weighed down by the pack, and the man in the tent watching, arms crossed. Face to face they sized each other up and the man in the tent spoke.

"So, you've come again, and brought that bloody box of bread and wine, I guess."

The man in the robe winced at the profanity and simply answered "Yes, I've come."

"Well I won't eat it this time either," the tent-man said with arms folded. And at that moment something that might have once been compassion stirred in his arid soul. He saw the parched lips, the dust covered feet, the sheer exhaustion of the man in the robe. For a moment their eyes met - and then the man in the tent looked away quickly.

"I won't eat it, but you look like you need it. If you want, you can come into the tent while *you* eat." This was all the thing like compassion could move him to say.

"Thank you," said the man in the robe. He was elated. He had come there for what seemed like a thousand times, over what seemed like a million years, and this was the first time the man in the tent had ever invited him to come inside, in the shade, out of the heat.

It was a beginning. Only a little beginning, but a beginning none the less.

~ Jonathan Stepp