

The seven messengers

Dino Buzzati

Translated by Bertrand Meyer

Day after day, having set out to explore my father's realm, I am moving further away from the city, and the dispatches that reach me become ever more infrequent.

I began the journey not long after my thirtieth birthday and more than eight years have since passed; to be exact, eight years, six months and fifteen days of unceasing travel. I believed, when I departed, that within a few weeks I would easily have reached the confines of the kingdom, but instead I have continued to encounter new people and new lands, and, everywhere, men who spoke my own language and claimed to be my subjects.

At times I think that my geographer's compass has gone awry and that while always believing to be heading south we may in reality have gone into circles, stepping back into our tracks without increasing the distance from the capital city; such might be the reason why we have not yet reached the outer frontier.

More often, though, I am tormented by a suspicion that the frontier may not exist, that the realm spreads out without any limit whatsoever, and that no matter how far I advance I will never arrive at its end. I set off on my journey when I was already past thirty years old, too late perhaps. My friends, and even my family, were mocking my project as a pointless sacrifice of the best years of my life. In truth, few of my faithful followers consented to leave with me. Insouciant as I was – so much more than now! – I was anxious to maintain communication, during the journey, with those dear to me, and among the knights in my escort I chose the seven best ones to serve as my messengers.

I believed, without having given it more thought, that seven would be more than enough. With the passing of time I have realized that this number was, to the contrary, ridiculously low; this even though none among them has fallen ill, or run into bandits, or exhausted his mounts. All seven have served with a tenacity and a devotion that I will find it hard ever to recompense.

To distinguish more easily between them, I assigned them names with initial letters in alphabetical order: Alexander, Bartholomew, Cameron, Dominic, Emilian, Frederic, Gregory.

Not being used to straying so far away from my home, I dispatched the first, Alexander, at the end of the second evening of our journey, when we had already traveled some eighty leagues. The next evening, to ensure the continuity of communications, I sent out the second one, then the third, then the fourth and so on until Gregory left on the eighth evening of the journey. The first messenger had not returned yet.

He rejoined us on the tenth evening, as we were laying out camp for the night in a deserted valley. I found out from Alexander that his speed had been lesser than envisioned. I had thought that by proceeding

alone, on an excellent steed, he could in a given time cover a distance twice as long as ours; he had instead achieved only one and a half as much: in one day, while we advanced by forty leagues, he devoured sixty, but no more.

So too it was for the others. Bartholomew, having left for the city on the third evening of our voyage, rejoined us on the fifteenth evening; Cameron, departing on the fourth, only returned on the twentieth. Soon enough, I realized that it sufficed to multiply by five the number of days passed so far to know when the messenger would be back with us.

As we moved ever further away from the capital, the travel time of our envoys was each time becoming longer. After fifty days of our journey, the interval between the arrivals of one messenger and the next began to increase perceptibly; while at the beginning I could see one of them reaching our camp every five days, the interval grew to twenty-five; along the way, the voice of my city was becoming fainter and fainter; entire weeks would pass without bringing any news.

When six months had elapsed – we had already gone over the Mountains of Fasani – the interval between one arrival and the next had risen to a good four months. The messengers were bringing news that had by then become stale; the envelopes reaching me were stained, sometimes with marks of humidity from all of their bearer's nights of respite.

We carried on. In vain did I try to convince myself that the clouds passing over me were identical to those of my boyhood, that the sky of the distant city was not different from the blue cupola overarching me, that the air was the same, same too the blowing of the wind, identical the voices of the birds. The clouds, the sky, the air, the winds, the birds appeared to me, in truth, as things new and different; and I felt a stranger to the land.

Forward, forward! Wanderers encountered in the lowlands were telling me that the confines were not far. I drew on my men not to pause, suppressing the signs of discouragement that appeared on their lips. Four years had already passed since my departure; such incessant tiredness. The capital, my home, my father had become strangely remote, their existence almost not believable any more. At least twenty months of silence and solitude now passed between successive appearances of the messengers. They would bring me curious letters yellowed by time, and in them I would find forgotten names, unfamiliar forms of expression, feelings that I could not understand. The next morning, after only one night of repose, the rest of us would get back on the road again, while the envoy would leave in the opposite direction, bringing to the city the letters that I had been a long time preparing.

Eight and a half years, however, have passed. This evening, I was dining alone when Dominic came in, still managing a smile, although one distorted by exhaustion. For almost seven years I had not seen him anymore. All through such a long time he had done nothing else than race through fields, woods and deserts, changing mount who knows how many times, to bring me this bundle of envelopes that until now I have not had the will to open. As to him, he already went to sleep, and will head back tomorrow at dawn.

He will head back for the last time. On my workbook I have calculated that if all goes well, as I continue my journey and he continues his, I will not be able to see Dominic again until thirty-four years from now. By then I will be seventy-two-years old. But I have begun to feel tired, and it is likely that before then death will have seized me. Henceforth I will not be able to see him again.

In thirty-four years from now (nay, earlier, much earlier) Dominic will unexpectedly catch sight of the lights of my encampment and wonder why, in the meantime, I have covered so little ground. Like last night, the good messenger will enter my tent with the letters yellowed by the years, replete with absurd news from a time already buried in the past; but he will stop on the brink, seeing me lying on the cot, flanked by two soldiers bearing torches – dead.

But still, Dominic, go, and do not call me cruel! Bring my last salute to the city where I was born. You are the last link to the world which once was mine too. The most recent messages have informed me that many things have changed, that my father is dead, that the Crown has passed to my elder brother, that I am considered lost, that tall palaces of stone have been built where the oaks earlier stood under which I used to go and play. And yet that is still my old homeland. You are, Dominic, the last link to them. The fifth messenger, Emilian, who will rejoin me, God willing, in a year and eight months, will not be able to leave again since he would not return in time. After you, O Dominic, there is only silence, unless I finally find the longed-for frontier. But the more I proceed the more I go convinced that the border does not exist.

It does not exist, the border, I suspect, at least not in the way we are used to think of it. There are no walls of separation, no dividing valleys, no mountains blocking off passage. Most likely I will cross the limit without even realizing it, and I will continue, in my ignorance, to move forward.

For that reason I intend that Emilian and the other envoys after him, when they next rejoin me, do not get back on the road to the capital but proceed ahead of me, so that I can find out in advance what awaits me.

For some time now during the evenings, an unusual anxiety has been flaring up in me, and it is no longer a regret of forsaken joys, as happened in the early days of the voyage; it is instead the impatience of discovering the unknown lands to which I am heading.

Day after day I notice on my way – this I have not until now confided to anyone – as I advance towards my improbable aim, I notice on my way, in the radiant sky, an unusual light which had never before appeared to me, even in dreams; and I notice how the plants, the mountains, the rivers through which we go seem to be made of an essence different from our native ones, and how the air brings forebodings that I cannot express.

Tomorrow a new hope will push me further ahead, towards those unexplored mountains that the shadows of the night are now hiding. Once more I will break camp, as Dominic disappears on the horizon on the opposite side, carrying with him, to the city so far away, my useless message.

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