

FORTY KILOMETERS

CL Bledsoe

The old man woke every morning before the sun graced the sky, ate his meager breakfast of rice pudding, and pedaled his bicycle twenty kilometers east along the highway to the far edge of his world. The sky bloomed from gray into a beautiful orange as he began to sweep the asphalt. He removed any litter or detritus. Animal carcasses were strategically dragged to various burial sites. The animals were rarely killed by cars, and most of them were picked pretty clean by predators, so mostly he was burying bones and fur. it wasn't a heavily trafficked road, but it was his duty to keep it clean. And he could only imagine the delight some wayward traveler might find chancing upon this seemingly barren road only to find it well-maintained, clean, with pleasing, well-groomed vegetation planted alongside it and fresh patches on any holes or cracked places, for which the old man carried a small pot of tar.

He'd traverse ten kilometers and then stop for a lunch of cold noodles as the sun rose high above the distant mountains. Then, he'd complete the remaining ten kilometers and arrive home as the sun sank, bathing the land in grey. The next morning, he'd pedal west with his tar pot, noodles, broom, and shovel all balanced on his bicycle.

Once, he found a single, beautiful boot made of some vibrant red leather-like material. It was a woman's boot, he assumed, because no man would ever wear something so garish. A foreign woman, he thought, or someone who'd travelled somewhere foreign, but why she would've left it, forever alone in the middle of his road, he didn't know. He considered various stories as to how it could've gotten there—thrown from the car during a joyride by some young city tough as punishment to keep his girl in line, maybe—but none of them were fulfilling. Finally, he buried it in the coyote graveyard with a little stick grave marker and a single word written on a wooden shingle: Shoe.

§

The shoe was the most interesting thing the old man had found until he found the body. It was a gruesome discovery. He'd gotten to it while it was fresh, by some strange luck; it was early, before the sun had baked her heat into the air, so the animals hadn't followed the dead smell to it. He saw it as

he rode, growing steadily larger on his horizon as he pedaled, until he reached it and stood, still on his bicycle, staring.

The body belonged to a young man with the long hair of a city dweller. He was naked, his skin pale from the cold of death. He was badly damaged; his right hand was missing and his face was bruised. His mouth was open in a scream but his tongue was missing. There were lesions, holes, bruises, and wounds over much of his body, including a series on his chest that looked as though something had been attached there. He'd been stabbed, the old man observed, but there was very little blood. He lay in the road as though he'd come to rest there, perhaps thrown from a car, which might explain some of the abrasions. This was all the old man could discern.

§

The nearest civil authorities were in the nearest village, which was a day's ride by bicycle. The old man strapped the body onto his bicycle and pushed it there, beginning the following morning at dawn. It took most of that day.

He received many strange looks as he rode through the village, and when he arrived at The People's Highway Commission building, the Citizen Guards almost wouldn't let him in because he had a dead man strapped to his bicycle.

There were two of them—one rail-thin, young man with cruelly chopped hair and an older man with tired eyes.

“I found him,” the old man explained.

“You must consider the threat of contagion,” the younger guard said. He practically barked at the old man, no doubt trying to please his commander by demonstrating his enthusiasm. “Did this man die of a communicable disease?”

“I don’t know how he died,” the old man said. “I think he may have been stabbed.”

The guards exchanged looks. “Did you kill him?” the younger one asked.

“Of course not,” the old man said. “Why would I carry him all this way if I killed him?”

The younger one got a glint in his eyes and raised a finger to the old man. “Perhaps you wanted to avoid suspicion?”

The old man looked into the young guard’s eyes and saw nothing there. He looked at the old guard and something passed between them, some communication old men shared. He nodded and waved the old man through, to the dismay of the younger guard.

Inside, the old man had to explain himself five more times, each time denying murdering the man strapped to his back, each time ushered into another room only to be reprimanded for bringing a bicycle into the building and then accused, again, of murder.

§

The last official he met with was the assistant regional director for the old man's area. This was a middle-aged man with a paunch, deep rings under his eyes, and a hairline that hadn't so much receded as packed up the kids for a trip to the park and never come back. He looked like he was perpetually in a state of near-desperation, as though he might start crying pathetically at any moment. He didn't even look up from his desk until he heard the squeak of the old man's bicycle tires. Then, when he saw the body, he screamed like an American woman in a movie when she sees a mouse.

"This is highly irregular," he said, a phrase the old man had come to loathe. The old man explained that he was a simple highway maintenance person and that he'd found the body and didn't know what to do about it. The assistant regional director shook his head emphatically while holding his hands up. "This is not my department," he said. "I'm not waste removal." The old man pleaded for help but was forcibly asked to leave the building, along with the

body. He spent the night pushing it home and buried it in the coyote cemetery with a little wooden shingle with the words “City Boy” on it.

§

Four days passed before he found another. This one seemed older than the previous one, though he was also naked and missing his right hand. His face was similarly bruised as though he’d been beaten savagely before death, but the bruises were laid over scars and old wounds. This was no city boy; this was a hoodlum.

Again, the old man tied the body to his bicycle, and again, he travelled to The People’s Highway Commission in the nearest village, this time by night so that he wouldn’t fall behind with his work. Again, he was met with strange looks, but he ignored them, and again, he was stopped at the door by the same two guards.

“You again,” the younger one said. “Found another, have you?”

The old man nodded respectfully.

“Are you sure you aren’t playing some kind of joke?” the guard asked.

“What sort of joke would that be?” the old man asked. “I don’t find anything funny about dead young men.” The young guard watched the old man

for any sign of a punch line, and when none was apparent, waved him through with his gruesome bicycle.

The assistant regional director held his hands up as soon as he saw the old man.

“You again!” he said. “Don’t you have anything better to do than to bother me with these trivial matters?”

The old man bowed respectfully and explained that he didn’t consider it a trivial matter.

“It’s littering. Nothing more,” the assistant regional director said. “Now go away; I have an important meeting.”

“But what should I do with this body?” the old man asked.

“What did you do with the last one?”

The old man explained that he’d buried it in the coyote cemetery, and the assistant regional director held his hands up as if to say, “Well? Do that again.”

The old man bowed and turned to leave.

“Don’t bring me any more of these,” the assistant regional director said. “It’s not my department.”

The old man left and took the body back with him. He buried it in the coyote cemetery and wrote “Tough City Boy” on the wooden shingle.

§

The old man found bodies regularly for the next few days. Because of the time it took him to deal with these, he wasn't able to get to some of them before the scavengers. He collected what he could and buried them. After several more days of sporadic bodies, the old man arrived at the coyote cemetery in order to bury more bodies, only to discover the assistant regional director of The People's Highway Commission there with a group of working men with shovels. They had dug up several coyotes and seemed to be standing around, arguing. The assistant regional director rushed over to the old man.

"Greetings, Older Brother," he said and bowed to the old man. The old man was surprised and returned the bow. "Would you mind telling us where you buried the bodies?"

§

The old man was quite surprised when he received a letter from the assistant regional director of The People's Highway Commission several days later. There was a newspaper included with a story about the assistant regional director discovering the bodies. It had a picture of him looking out over the coyote cemetery. In the background of the picture, the old man was just visible,

standing respectfully off to the side. He folded the newspaper and the letter, putting them away to look at later. He had work to do now.

§

Weeks passed with no more bodies. There were more letters from the assistant regional director and newspapers with stories about the bodies. It seems that there had been some sort of fighting between rival gangs. The bodies represented one gang securing its territory. The assistant regional director was credited with spearheading an investigation into these gangs. He'd been promoted out of The People's Highway Commission to lead a government task force into the gang violence. He'd received a special commendation for it. The government had brought soldiers in to stop the fighting. The old man saw them drive by in their green, painted trucks. Sometimes they waved, and he'd pause in his sweeping or tarring to wave back.

§

For a long time, there were no more bodies. The soldiers' trucks stirred up more dust and added unusual wear and tear to the road, so the old man kept quite busy. He didn't mind this, though; he was the type of person who preferred to be busy rather than idle.

Eventually, the soldiers' patrols grew less and less frequent and then stopped altogether. The old man missed waving to them; sometimes they'd stopped and had lunch with him. But he craved his solitude as well. And the road certainly looked much nicer without their added traffic. The old man knew that in life there were often trade-offs.

It was ten days after he saw the last soldier patrol that the old man found the assistant regional director's body, or rather the man who'd held this rank before his meteoric rise. It was naked, missing the right hand and the tongue, and badly beaten. He appeared to have died screaming, because his eyes were still open, staring in terror, and his mouth was frozen in mid-shriek.

The old man felt sad when he found the body, in the same way he'd felt sad when he found each of the other bodies. That first one stuck with him the most. Perhaps if someone had explained to the boy that life wasn't what he thought it was, he'd still be alive.

He couldn't remember the man's new title, so he wrote "Assistant Regional Director to The People's Highway Commission" on the wooden shingle. Because there were so many words, he had to write it very small, so it was difficult to read. Then he got on his bicycle and went back to work.

CL Bledsoe is the assistant editor for *The Dead Mule* and author of fifteen books, most recently the poetry collections *King of Loneliness* and *Trashcans in Love* and the flash fiction collection *Ray's Sea World*. He lives in northern Virginia with his daughter.