

# The Water Seeker by Norbert Kovacs

The tall man rides his camel across the desert in search of water. The pursuit in one place then another has become most of his life's work. Without the search, the water would mean nothing to him. His body's need for the substance is besides the point, he feels.

The oases the man tries to find usually have no location he might know ahead of time, say from a map. They form and go in the desert in haphazard fashion, springing up quickly and vanishing soon. He must find the short-term places the best he can. Signs of water offer him a major aid: a green plant growing by a dune, a humid wind. He needs only one sign to decide water might lie in a certain direction. He rides into the desert, confident in his hunches over water. He thinks of the mud patch he has seen and considers, A reserve must lie beneath the sands--it may show just ahead. He recalls the plants on the dry plain and imagines, When I find them next, it will be beside open water. He has pursued thoughts of these kind on many, long desert treks.

The man confronts hard environs wherever he goes. The sun beats on him almost daily; the dunes stretch dry and hot everywhere; over the sands, the winds blow like fire. The man defends himself from the elements, hoping not to be overcome. He wears a cloth over his head to block the sun. He masks his face against the great, howling dust. However, he seizes comforts on his way, too. He stops to watch red sunsets, happy in his day's progress.

He lets the cool, night winds run over his face and tired limbs. All the while, he anticipates the water that he trusts is lying ahead.

The man many times fails to reach water. Since he has pursued only a hunch about where it might be, there is nothing to tell him his plans will succeed once he has gone a certain distance or direction. He decides simply after he has endured enough desert heat and dust that he should go no farther. Then he stops, rests, and reconnoiters. He searches the sands until he spots some new potential sign of water, forms a fresh hunch over where to go, and proceeds. On the other hand, the man can find water. The pool sparkles before him, liquid blue in abundance, on climbing a last dusty dune. His success or failure is always up in the air, giving his journey a degree of recurring suspense.

Not all the man's treks follow this pattern. He journeys in certain seasons when he is guaranteed to reach an oasis after so many days at a said distance. However, these trips prove harder than his others in nearly every case. The heat reaches the point that he barely can shift. The sun barrels down as if ready to strike him flat. To go onwards, he tells himself the number of days he expects to travel. Time telescopes out for the effort; thought and action becomes difficult. He pushes on, determined to get the journey done. Distances seem to double and treble without gaining in actual length. His trek warps unlike he could have foretold. He reaches its end more exhausted than relieved.

The man takes other water journeys that unfold more like pleasures. He tells himself, lounging idly by his camel, "Wouldn't it be nice to find water on the desert plain?" Though he has discovered no sign there might be, he heads onto the plain and hits an oasis nearly the first thing. Else he says, "If only water sprung by the stone hill where I cut my arm." He journeys there in curiosity and walks right to a perfectly blue pool shaded by palm trees. He enjoys the suddenness of these discoveries as much as finding the water itself. "It proves I have good intuition," he says.

The man relishes the water that he finds. He drinks freely from the sparkling pool, letting the water loosen his parched tongue and mouth. Dunking his head, he washes his dry face and the back of his neck while his camel drinks. Soon, his entire body feels new and limber. It is then the man investigates the pool's environs. If the place has trees, he diligently picks their fruit and eats these during his stay at the oasis. The fruit nourishes him as much as the water refreshes, he finds. He is fulfilled in the deepest sense.

Great as he believes the blue pools to be, the oases dry up in a few days after the man discovers them. It is not that he drinks all the water. The camel does not. The water simply drains away, returning to the earth from where it sprang. The man speculates that it may be that, under the sand, the desert earth is full of holes that let water rise but not stay long at the surface. He has thought, at other times, a strange hydraulics might be at play, some great pressure applied to lift the water that gives out soon after the liquid reaches the open air. The water goes in any case, and he is left without a drop to drink. The desert sands close in. The man becomes tired of the waterless hole. He leaves the spot whether he has found water signs or thought to discover them; he means to get a fresh start. He rides out under the bold, desert sun; he breathes the clean, morning air of the open sands.

When the man needs water and else cannot find it, he goes to the stone mountains in the middle of the desert. The mountains, a chain of hard, jagged basalt, are full of dark peaks and snaking valleys. Their bare, exposed rock nurture little plant or animal life. The place, however, harbors pools of clean water by some of its mountains. The man camps at these for several days when his physical need is greatest, drinks the water, and rests. While a relief, the mountain water keeps him alive only in the barest sense. To drink it means he continues breathing, little more. Anyone else might do the same for himself. It never replenishes him as seeking and finding a desert oasis does.

When he requires water, the man has considered not going to the mountains but the city to the north. The city sits on a great aquifer, so the residents have an ample supply. He could take his fill there if he liked. The problem is the copious amount to be had. The city public can help themselves to water from faucets in their homes and hand

pumps on the street. City merchants sell water bottled, stacked in long rows on their store shelves. Water forms a superfluity in the metropolis; no one misses the liquid if any is lost. Water like that is not the dear, sparkling kind that he pursues. So, he avoids the city by design.

In roaming the desert, the tall man meets other men seeking oases. The desert has moved them to be intrepid as he is, hopes of water glistening in their inmost selves. The man keeps this in mind as he talks to his fellow seekers by the dunes and hears the stories of their adventures. The men tell one another about the desert where they have gone, the stress of the elements, their wonderful discoveries of water; in the process, they often become friends. The ties offer a kind of encouragement to the men amid their journeys in the hostile, arid landscape. Almost all find it a relief from the desert doldrums. However, for all the pluses that company offers, the tall man fails to bond with a number of his fellow seekers. Some men inspire him to contrariness, in fact. A solitary wanderer, his eyes bright, tells him that he discovered a great blue lake ringed by date and fig trees. The tall man senses how great it was to encounter the pool, and his jealousy sparks. He asks the wanderer all about the lake, including where it lay; once they part, he starts toward the place, hoping to enjoy it himself. I can have at that water as well as anyone, he supposes as he rides over the hot sand. Soon enough, he reaches the spot the wanderer described. To his surprise, he discovers it a gaping hole that features only a thin puddle. The lake has gone as the other oases do, back into the desert sands. The man realizes his mistake in believing another man's oasis would stay for him and is humbled.

Besides lone travelers, the man meets the occasional caravan crossing the desert. He sojourns a night or two with the families that form these large groups and tells them about his searches for water. The people listen, awestruck to hear of his treks across purple sand and stony hills, his accounts of brilliant pools. The people ask if any of his springs might be nearby, and he hints to encourage them that there might. The man and the caravan part in the mornings, the many people still buzzing over his stories. It turns out none of the caravans, as the man later hears, try to find an oasis of their own. The most he hears is that a few among them gaze idly across the dunes, while keeping pace with their companions. The groups cross the hot plain on the route they had chosen earlier. The stories told them remain stories and never become cause for new journeys. It must be hard for a caravan really to seek in the desert, the tall man thinks with regret.

The few people the man has gotten actually to trek for water have been family and friends from his home village. He has led a childhood friend, taken by his tale of a bubbling spring, into the desert. A cousin came after hearing him tell of wild grapes by some dunes. The friend or the relation goes discovering oases with the man around the desert. The trips have their effect on the newcomers' confidence. Once they sense they can navigate the wastes without dying, they leave the tall man and pursue water on their own. They ride tall on their camels, faces lifted proudly. The man never feels very sad to be left; he understands that water, to be found best, calls for the most personal, intimate journey.

Lately, the region's water experts have said that the reservoirs beneath the desert may be nearing exhaustion. Their annual survey of the plain and the sandy hills shows that the desert's surface water has been shrinking for years. The trees at the waterside seem to produce rarer fruits each season. The tall man has heard the reports; in answer, he says that if the oases dwindle, he will force them to come regardless. He explains that he would tell the baked desert ground beneath his feet, "Remember you can break into flow. I have known its wonder." He would conjure an oasis just by those emphatic words. The supply of actual water within the earth has little to do with the question of it succeeding, he thinks.

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