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CHAPTER ONE

the LURE *of the* ROAD

That life is a journey and that we are all travelers on the road is, at once, a well-worn cliché and a profound and universal truth. It lies at the heart of many of the greatest works of the human imagination (*The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Don Quixote*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Moby-Dick*, *Great Expectations*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Five Books of Moses, and the Acts of the Apostles), and it speaks to us at the deepest core of our being. No matter how comfortable our situation may be, no matter how permanent it may seem, we never quite feel at home. There is, in all of us, a vague restlessness, a feeling that, to quote the old hymn, this world is not our home. That inner voice ever troubles us with the realization that we are all, finally, pilgrims and sojourners, strangers in a strange land.

Not surprisingly, most of us stay put. Better to suppress that

nagging voice than to risk the dangers of the road. And yet, even if we do not go off on adventures ourselves, we are continually drawn to characters, both historical and fictional, who do. Although the taking of pilgrimages to holy shrines and sacred places has played a major role in most world religions (especially medieval Catholicism), today, only Islam maintains a strong and visible commitment to this ancient discipline. True, many modern Americans will take secular, consumer-driven pilgrimages to such places as Disney World or Graceland or Manhattan, while others will take more intellectual and aesthetic pilgrimages to Rome or to Athens or to Stratford-upon-Avon. A number of Jews and Christians will even make their way to the Holy Land. Still, something, I fear, has been lost. Perhaps it is that sense of messianic anticipation that converts the journey into a longing for higher purpose. Perhaps it is that willingness to be profoundly changed that transforms it into a voyage of self-discovery. Perhaps we simply insulate ourselves too much.

Resisting the Road

The Lord of the Rings, like all the great romances of the Middle Ages, is essentially a quest narrative. Here, however, we do not encounter a willing hero (like Homer's Odysseus) whose journey promises him both reward and rest; rather, we have an unwilling hero (like Virgil's Aeneas) who does not wish, at least initially, to leave his home and who, if he reaches the end of his quest, will not necessarily receive either rest or reward. Tolkien's hero, a Hobbit named Frodo Baggins who lives a peaceful life in the rustic, protected Shire, is the nephew of another Hobbit named Bilbo who had himself gone on an adventure nearly eighty years earlier.

As Tolkien tells the tale in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is recruited by

Gandalf the wizard and a group of enterprising Dwarfs to help them recover stolen treasure from a fierce dragon named Smaug. The bourgeois Bilbo, who desires only a simple, complication-free life, is anything but enthusiastic. Rather than take joy in the twists and turns of the Road, he spends the first half of his journey casting continual backward glances to his safe, warm, comfortable Hobbit hole. Though Bilbo will prove the hero of the expedition, and though he will return to his home (Bag End) a more courageous and cosmopolitan person, his "there and back again" adventure is, in the final analysis, more a Viking raid than a quest or pilgrimage. Whereas Frodo is profoundly tested and changed by his travels along the Road, Bilbo, like Phileas Fogg or Lewis Carroll's Alice, returns to his very "English" Shire and picks up exactly where he left off.

Actually, it is a bit more complicated than that. *The Lord of the Rings* begins with Bilbo's celebration of his 111th birthday and his decision to leave the Shire and go to Rivendell to spend his closing years with the Elves. It has taken him over seventy years, but Bilbo has finally realized that his adventure *did* change him and that he cannot remain forever in the Shire. The Road calls out to him one last time, and he must go. Deep down, he would like to bring his thirty-three-year-old nephew with him, but he knows that Frodo is not ready to leave his home and take to the Road. He tries to explain this to Gandalf, who was his guide on his adventure and who will soon become Frodo's guide on his:

> I want to see the wild country again before I die, and the Mountains; but [Frodo] is still in love with the Shire, with woods and fields and little rivers. He ought to be comfortable here [in Bag End]. (I.i.32)

And comfortable he remains, until he reaches his fiftieth year: the same age Bilbo had been when he had set off on his adventure. By then, a wrestling has begun within Frodo: part of him (his Bilbo side) is drawn to the Shire, to all that is safe and familiar; another part (what we might call his pilgrim side) yearns to leave, to experience the far-flung world. In the end, however, he is compelled to depart, for Bilbo has unwittingly left in his possession the Ring of Sauron, the Dark Lord. If Frodo does not take this Ring to Rivendell immediately, he risks destruction not only for himself but for the Shire and, ultimately, all of Middle-earth.

And so, whether he wishes it or not, Frodo is cast out onto the Road, forced to embark on a pilgrimage that he has long desired to take, but would never have had the courage or resolve to begin. But it will take him some time to really leave the Shire behind, to learn to think of himself as a true sojourner in a world that does not belong to him and that cannot, in any case, promise final rest. For the lesson that the journey is to teach us is not simply that it is good to go on pilgrimages, but that we are pilgrims. Travel does not simply "broaden our minds"; it offers us insight into our own status as resident aliens in a fallen world. The Bilbo we meet at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* has learned this lesson in part. It will be left to Frodo to learn it in full.

In his struggles to learn it, Frodo is helped by a chance meeting with a group of Elves who are heading for the Gray Havens, from which point they will leave Middle-earth and sail far to the West. They are, quite literally, exiles, for as Tolkien tells us in *The Silmarillion*, they are descended from Elves who forsook their true home in the West and set out East for Middle-earth. They were and are *meant* for the West, as we Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve *were* meant for the Garden of Eden and now *are* meant for the New

Jerusalem. Like all the Elves in Middle-earth, these that Frodo meet harbor an inner sadness; about them there hangs a melancholy, elegiac mood. They want to stay, yet know they must leave. They love dearly that which they must lose ere long. Sooner or later, they and the memory of them will fade from Middle-earth.

From these serene but displaced beings, Frodo learns that he must not return to the Shire, for it can no longer afford him protection. Frodo muses sadly that he never expected such danger to reach "our own Shire"; whereupon he is sternly but kindly rebuked by the Elf Gildor:

> But it is not your own Shire. . . . Others dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out. (I.iii.82)

Up until now, Frodo has attempted to insulate himself, like the "ugly American" who visits exotic countries without ever stepping out of his American cocoon. (These "ugly Americans" have, of course, always been with us; in the General Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes a group of "bourgeois" craftsmen who have brought their own cook with them lest they be forced to adapt to foreign food!) Now Frodo must let go of all that is safe and familiar and fully embrace the Road. Now he must learn that sense of urgency that the apostle Paul learned (perhaps) from his long years of wandering: "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in

its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29–31 NIV).

We do not learn such hard truths sitting at home in our easy chairs. We can only learn them on the Road.

Shasta's Journey

Bilbo and Frodo have a hard time leaving a place where they have known much peace and contentment. Ironically, the hero of *The Horse and His Boy* has the opposite problem: he fears to leave a place where he has known neither peace nor contentment. Unique among the Chronicles, *The Horse and His Boy* focuses not on children from our world, but on two children who live in the heathen and tyrannical land of Calormen, which lies due south of Narnia. One of these children is an unhappy princess (Aravis) who decides to flee from a distasteful arranged marriage. The other is a poor Oliver Twist–like orphan (Shasta) who has been raised by a cruel and unloving fisherman. Though Shasta does not know for sure that the fisherman is not his real father, he has long suspected that he does not belong in this land, that his true destiny and real identity lie elsewhere. Something within him has always impelled him to strain his eyes northward, but he has as yet been unable to muster the courage or find the opportunity to escape.

Then, as it does to Frodo, a situation arises that all but forces Shasta to flee from his native village and set out on the Road. Shasta overhears disturbing news that, first, his "father" is not his real father, and second, that he is about to sell him into the service of an even harsher taskmaster. Liberated by this discovery that the home and father he has never been able to love are, in fact, neither, Shasta is placed in a position where going off on a pilgrimage seems not only the proper but the necessary thing to do. But he cannot endure the journey alone. As Frodo is assisted on his way

by Gandalf, Sam, Aragorn, and many others, Shasta is helped by a talking Narnian horse (Bree) who was kidnapped while a foal and has lived the brutal life of a dumb warhorse in Calormen.

Bree helps strengthen Shasta's resolve to leave by not only promising to carry him on his back, but by filling his heart and mind with a vision of what lies at the end of the Road:

> The happy land of Narnia—Narnia of the heathery mountains and the thymy downs. Narnia of the many rivers, the plashing glens, the mossy caverns and the deep forests ringing with the hammers of the Dwarfs. Oh the sweet air of Narnia! An hour's life there is better than a thousand years in Calormen. (I.9).

Unconsciously paraphrasing Psalm 84:10, Bree depicts Narnia as a place that is vastly superior to Calormen. Life there is richer, fuller, closer to what life was meant to be. It is where all those who are truly free belong. Indeed, when Shasta confesses that he has always longed to go north, Bree responds: "'Of course you have. . . . That's because of the blood that is in you. I'm sure you're true northern stock'" (I.12).

If the truth be told, we are all, finally, of true northern stock. That's one of the things that fairy tales teach us: that we are all heroes or princesses in disguise. And if that is so, then we must all set out to discover who we truly are: not so we can become rich or successful in the debased modern, consumerist sense, but so that we can step into our true inheritance.

The Road is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, but it offers to those who embrace it the rare and precious gift of self-knowledge. It forces us to step outside that which is known—outside of our "comfort zone" we would say today—and, by so doing, strips us of all our masks and disguises and alter egos. It forces us to look

unswervingly into the face of fear, of confusion, of loneliness, reduces us to our naked essence. And then, slowly, it makes us stronger and wiser.

In the end, Shasta will play an instrumental role in saving Narnia from invasion by Calormen, just as Frodo will play an instrumental role in saving Middle-earth from the iron tyranny of Sauron. But they cannot participate in that saving act until they become the kind of people who can play the role of willing (if flawed) hero. To help prepare them for this role, to help them achieve the necessary self-knowledge, they are each given a close, intimate traveling companion who so contrasts and complements them as to aid in their self-development. For Shasta that companion is Aravis, whose aristocratic upbringing and regal self-confidence help to wean him away from his narrow provincialism and his lack of any sense of social responsibility. For Frodo that companion is Sam, his rustic gardener, whose earthy common sense and cheerful practicality keep Frodo going when his idealism threatens to crumble under the weight of Sauron's evil. In this, Frodo and Sam bear a more than passing resemblance to literature's most famous master/servant, idealist/realist pair: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

On the Road, we cannot escape from ourselves, but we also cannot escape from our companions—at least without risking grave peril. The temptation to abandon the path to which we have been called is often a strong one, but we must nevertheless trust that the Lord of the Road knows what He is doing. All we can do is press on with faith, hope, and perseverance.

That is one of the rules of the Road.