

## ANALYSIS

“The Traveler” (1951)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“He and Mary drove up from Cambridge to Vermont and were staying at the Grays’ on a skiing trip during the winter of 1941-42. ‘It was,’ he recalled years later, ‘about 20 below, everyone had the flu, the car wouldn’t start, and I had to walk about two miles to town...to get some help.’ As he walked through ‘a magical kind of moonlight,’ he was reminded of his own childhood in Saskatchewan—suddenly he was transported back in time. He felt he had done this before and he had been ‘here’ before. In the story, as the central character walks in the starlight, ‘something long buried and forgotten tugged in him and a shiver not entirely from cold prickled his whole body with gooseflesh. There had been times in his childhood when he had walked home alone and had been temporarily lost in nights like this.... He felt spooked.’

The story concerns a pharmaceutical salesman whose car breaks down at night out in the country, in the snow. At first he waits for a passing car, but none comes and he decides to walk and look for a farmhouse. But having set out to find help for himself, he is the one who must give help when he finally reaches a farm and finds a boy, anxious and desperate, whose grandfather has fallen ill. How could the author’s experience of recognizing a feeling from childhood be translated into a story about a medicine supply salesman whose car breaks down on a country road? The question was asked at a bookstore reading set up to publicize the publication of his *Collected Stories*, and the author replied, ‘Don’t trust the details—trust the feeling.’

In ‘The Traveler’ as the salesman’s situation becomes increasingly more desperate, he begins not only to experience some fear, but also resentment. He thinks of where he should be—comfortably bathed, fed, and in his warm hotel room. He thinks, ‘For all of this to be torn away suddenly, for him to be stumbling up a deserted road in danger of freezing to death, just because some simple mechanical part that had functioned for thirty thousand miles refused to function any longer, this was outrage, and he hated it.’ The tone and emotion here is reminiscent of the correspondent in Stephen Crane’s ‘The Open Boat’... The salesman, too, through the failure of a mechanical device (a ship for the correspondent), is cast to the whims of a merciless, indifferent nature. Both stories depend on the archetype of the journey, a journey through the elements, the sea and snow, which threaten death at any moment. And in the Crane and Stegner stories the extremity of the protagonists’ situations are underlined by a comparison with life as it might have been, or should have been, in the comfort of shore, or, in the case of the salesman, the comfort of his hotel room.

Rescue, more than physically, comes in both stories as a result of the discovery by the protagonist of their bonds of brotherhood with other men. And in both stories the recognition of that bond comes in a changing of perspective. For the correspondent in ‘The Open Boat’ that change comes when, after finding himself in a lifeboat with three other men, surrounded by the threatening sea, he realizes how dependent on each other they have become. For the traveler the change comes when he sees himself in the boy and determines that he must help him.

The beginnings of the change for the salesman come in a scene where his fear is changed to an apprehension of radiance with the appearance of the moon. This is a moment of enlightenment, of ‘warmth’—he is about to be taken out of his need to be rescued into the role of rescuer. In this moment the entire perspective is altered (both stories are in part about perception—how we see things and why). As the salesman approaches a farmhouse he encounters a boy stumbling out of a barn where he had been hitching a horse to a sleigh in order to get help for his grandfather. In this meeting with the boy, the salesman seems to meet himself at the same age. The kitchen is familiar in all its smells: ‘The ways a man fitted in with himself and with other human beings were curious and complex.’ As he takes the sleigh to get help at the Hill farm, 2 miles down the road, the salesman ‘looked back once, to fix forever the picture of himself standing silently watching himself go.... For from the most chronic and incurable of ills, identity, he had looked outward and for one unmistakable instant recognized himself’.”

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