

## *An Epiphany Short Story*

by Kate Abbott

The star went on taunting him even as he turned his back and pointed his horse's head down the dusty road toward dawn. It sent a faint unease up his spine the way the star hung in the west behind him, open-mouthed, as it had for months.

He'd make sense of it, sooner or later. He shaded his eyes against the sun beginning to rise over the east road.

He took some comfort from the fact that his two companions appeared unbothered by the star's looming. Instead, the learned one was at his wit's end with the quiet one from the far east, as he had been for nearly their whole journey together. Squaring himself up on his horse, the learned one raised a finger at the back of the other one plodding silently ahead of him on his ludicrous donkey. "I can still scarcely believe that you gave the *myrrh*, of all things," intoned the learned one.

The myrrh had been a strange choice. Even now, their trunks were heaving across the horses' backs with all the diplomatic gifts they'd brought from the eastern empire, appropriate for meeting a new king, which remained ungiven. There were tapestries, rare gems, stoppered bottles of precious wine. The quiet one had brought nothing, but the other two had generously let him go through their horses' trunks to save face.

As was customary, they had waited until they'd met the king to decide which gifts they'd each present, listening to the quiet whisper of the Wise Lord for inspiration. They had bowed their heads and offered the gifts to the cooing baby king in his mother's arms. The first unveiled the gold to symbolize the king's future wealth, then the learned one revealed fine incense for elite rites. But the solemn moment was broken when the quiet one smiled and unwrapped the myrrh in his outstretched hand. The first two shot sharp looks at him and nearly gasped, but the mother closed her eyes, bowed her head reverently, and took it.

"What can you have meant by that, my friend?" the learned one went on to the back of the quiet one before him. "You can't have meant it as perfume, because *I* gave perfume. We were *very* clear that we would not give the same gift twice. Which can only mean you meant it as—" He shuddered. "Wrong, simply wrong," he hissed, "to give such a morbid gift to a king."

"To a *baby*," grimaced the first in agreement.

The quiet one shrugged, turning his face to the north with a tiny smile. "Perhaps." He turned back to the east and said nothing further, plodding on his ridiculous donkey.

The first and the second shot each other mystified looks, wise men struck dumb. Annoying, unbearable, that some back home called *him* the wisest of men.

The quiet one's shrug cast a pall over the return journey.

With the silence and the hypnotic sway of the horse, the first one contemplated how he would describe the visit to the homebound many back in the great eastern empire, anxiously awaiting his tales of adventure in the rambunctious western frontier.

Imagine: they had come all the way from Persia and beyond at the foot of a star that promised a king. But when they entered this country, the star had led them into nothingness, a hilly desert full of windswept homesteads, hungry goats, angry-eyed peasants. The star was playing tricks on them, expert astrologers though they were. No doubt the Wise Lord would not lead them to a random hovel. On a holy diplomatic mission such as this, an embassy to a new king, shouldn't they go to the palace?

They did, and that was when they met the governor-king. The first had twitched his hand toward the gold in his satchel. Gold—a gift fit for a king. He ought to offer it straight away. He was a practical man, Wise Lord knew. But he hadn't liked the gleam in this king's eye, the knifelike sheen in his smile, his prying questions. He'd stilled his hand, the Wise Lord whispering *not yet*. Together with his companions, he'd breathed sighs of relief in the dark night outside the palace gates afterward, weighed down and dizzy with lavish courses and western wine.

The star hung patient to the south. They saddled their animals and meandered where it led.

And, having left the little family in their little house (more of a barn, to their eyes), the star lay parked above it, as though imploring them to stay.

They'd left.

They had made camp among hospitable shepherds, who seemed to be under the rather amusing impression that the men were themselves kings of some kind. Breaking bread with the men and their sheep, they spoke in polite hushed tones in their own shared language about the strange meeting with the king. The boy's parents had been kind, terribly kind, and rather noble of mien, yes, but—dwelling in what was essentially a stable. Was that how things were done out here in the ragged west? Where were their attendants, their courtiers, the palace, the subjects? Was he to be a king among *sheep*? A mind-twister, a riddle to chew on for years. How can a peasant child be a king, and a rich man in a palace a villain? What did the Wise Lord mean by all of it?

They didn't laugh yet, but they would on the east road. Probably.

In the morning, to avoid the governor-king's nauseating presence, his unsettling demands to know where they found the baby, they skirted Jerusalem by many miles. The long road took them through somewhere called Nazareth, where they fumbled with the language as they traded for dried meat and fruit and nuts for the extended journey.

The learned one's homeland was the nearest, so he parted first. Later, when the time came for the quiet one to continue alone down the far-east road, the first one had opened his mouth for some

meaningful goodbye. But the quiet one had raised his hand and said, “perhaps,” then turned his donkey and swayed away.

Perhaps, the first one thought afterward as he plodded alone, they would meet again sooner or later. It might happen again as it had many months ago, when they had nearly collided as strangers on the road in their curiosity at the new star in the west.

After all, who is to say what will happen? “Not a wise man,” he chuckled to himself, and his horse shook his head in sage agreement.

On his final night on the road beneath the onyx sky, he grew sleepy wondering about the tiny king he had seen. What would become of him and his brave mother, his kind-eyed father?

Would the gold make his travels easy?

Would the frankincense smoke and perfume the space around him, awing his courtiers?

Would the myrrh—

*The aging mother, her wise eyes sad, unwrapping the myrrh to fill the king's death shroud.*

He jerked awake, shaking his head and gasping. What could the Wise Lord mean by such an awful image? A premonition?

He remembered how the third one had shrugged after giving the myrrh. A funerary gift. What had the Wise Lord told him?

Soon he'd be back to his studies and to his magic tricks, a glimpse for the masses of the inexpressible. Starry eyes in the audience. Mute tricks in his intelligent hands. What wisdom would he have to share? He felt as foolish as his horse.

Perhaps someday the Wise Lord would show him another star to make clear what this journey's purpose had been, and what the vision portended.

But the silent stars never troubled him again.