The Star Gazer

There was a young man, a farm hand of average stature, who had a kind and caring heart. His eyes were no sharper than any others and he only saw what needed to be seen.

The only thing that set this young man apart from his fellow farm hands was that his only surviving family lived in a city far to the East. He wanted desperately to go there and to see them, but he had not enough money for the journey.

The man that owned the farm rarely showed his face for any length of time, and then not without real cause, so it was a surprise to everyone when he took the young man into his home one day.

The owner bade the young man sit down, so he did, not wanting to appear disrespectful.

“You are young and strong, but it is obvious that you take no pleasure in your work. You often think of a place that you would rather be. This is a bad thing in life; you must learn to see what is here before thinking about that place. This I will teach you.”

“But I can see clearly.”

“You *see* well enough, but your focus is elsewhere. Remember this lesson: always focus on what you see in the present moment before thinking on other sights.”

And so the owner began to teach the young man to see with his eyes and to focus with his mind both at once. The owner had him describe what he saw in greater and greater detail for a greater amount of time each day until the young man’s focus was impeccable.

Now during the day he worked with twice as much vigor and thought of his family only when all else was done, in the time before he went to sleep.

Thanks to this he was able to make the money he needed twice as quickly. After thanking the owner profusely for his guidance, the young man left the farm and began his journey.

He walked for he had no horse and often camped out under the stars, the soft grasses for his bed. Food he bought from farms and inns as he passed by, the latter of which he would stay in when the weather proved unfavourable.

The young man came to the realization that he did not know how far away the city actually was. Whenever they had met his relatives had always come to them and – as they were wealthy – they had come by carriage. He supposed that if he simply continued to travel east he would make it to the city eventually.

He lived day to day, always focusing on present events, taking in every detail and learning much about the lives of those in the country. Some days he would not buy enough food to make it last until the next farm and he would go hungry. Others he would pass by an inn early in the morning and get caught in a storm in the evening. Always he continued on his journey.

Passersby on the road told him what they knew of the city: that it was large and prosperous, that the princess was fair beyond description, but none of them could say just how far away it was.

Then one day he made to buy some food from a local farm and found himself spending the last of his coinage. He was mortified, but he had no choice except to continue walking east as he had been doing for a fortnight.

That very day, as he was walking, another traveller, a man wearing the blue cloth of the merchant guild, came to walk beside him, stride for stride.

“Your face is the face of a man who does not know what to do. Tell me what you need, young man, and perhaps I can help you.”

So the young man told him what had transpired.

“It seems to me that you are so focused on the present that you have forgotten to see what lies ahead. Every traveller must see like this, just as every worker must see only the present, like you do. Come, I will teach you how to focus on the future.”

So they continued on their way, the wandering man teaching and sharing everything he had with the young man.

He learned what distance to walk each day and how quickly he should do so. He learned the proper values of coinage and how it should best be spent to make it last on the road. He learned to read the weather and how to properly assess his own equipment. He learned how to look ahead, to plan.

One day they came to a fork in the road, the same as many they had seen before, but this time the wandering man told him that it was time to part ways.

“Please let me repay you somehow!” exclaimed the young man, dismayed at the loss of his mentor.

“I need nothing from you my young friend for you have already repaid my aid with your company all these long days.”

Without further ado the wandering man went down one path while the young man, after staring after him awhile, went down the other.

The day was not yet done when the young man came across the rock.

It was large and rectangular and there were shallow chiseled steps leading to the top, a design that caught the young man’s interest.

After a few moments an old man appeared from behind the tall, rectangular rock and startled the young man.

“And who are you, who finds my seeing stone so interesting?”

“I am a traveller looking for a large city close by.”

“There is such a place, not three days walk from here.”

“I’ll be on my way then, I do not wish to disturb you further.”

“And where will you sleep? You’ll not get much further this night, so please accept my hospitality.”

And so the young man was led behind the seeing stone to find a cave of sorts chiseled from the rock. This cave proved to be both cozy and warm, if a little intimate.

Once the old man had made a place for the young man he excused himself and went back outside. The young man went to sleep, but was woken at dawn the next morning by the return of the old man.

“What were you doing out there that took you the whole night?” asked the young man curiously.

“What I do every night, I gaze at the stars. I can teach this to you, if you are willing.”

“What is there to see among the stars when all that matters is here on the solid ground?”

“We can learn about ourselves from the stars.”

The next night the young man went with the old man to gaze up at the stars.

After a lengthy period of time the old man began to point out the constellations, to identify which stars were closer and which larger, to tell the young man which ones were closer to their time and which pinpoints of light were not stars at all, but large rocks or other worlds and the young man was filled with awe that such amazing variety existed in a place that appeared so plain.

The young man spent first one week and then another studying the skies with the old man, learning to see the minutest details of the lights.

Eventually, however, the young man grew impatient to finish his long journey and told the old man that it was time for him to be on his way.

“There is one last thing I wish to teach you before you go your way. Please, stay and gaze with me one last night.”

The young man consented, knowing that one day could not make a difference. They went out onto the seeing stone and gazed at the sky together for the last time.

“Stars live for an immeasurable length of time, but even they must die one day. Most dying stars celebrate the ending of their life and burst into a beautiful cloud in which many new stars can be born, but there are others who are not so selfless.

“Dying stars can create new life with their death, but they can also take it away. When a star is bitter in death it consumes itself creating a black void which pulls all other things into itself. These we call Dark Stars for they devoir even the light.”

“If they cannot be seen then how is it that you know that they exist?”

“As I said they pull all other things, all of those innumerable points of light, into themselves. You must find them by watching the others, how they move, if they are moving towards a Dark Star.”

And so the young man looked all night long, studying those miniscule details until he found one, a Dark Star, a malevolent presence perfectly disguised into the black folds of the night.

When the young man pointed this out to the old man he smiled and told him that he had become a true star gazer.

The next morning the young man set out for the large city where his family lived and three days later he arrived.

The city was certainly much larger than any he had seen before and had a surrounding wall to protect it. The gates were open and, after paying the guard at the gate, he entered.

After an hour of asking for his family on the street he finally came to their home, a far larger home than any he had seen before.

His family was much surprised and quite delighted to see him and he was taken in and fed promptly. They gasped in horror as he told them of his parent’s death and gasped in wonder when he told them of his journey.

They told him that they were attending a royal banquet the following week, if he would like to join them. It would give him a chance to meet new people and get used to life in the city for, they assured him, they would provide for him for however long he needed.

Over the next week the young man explored the city and marvelled at the ease of life there, that food could be bought at a market with coin made by doing such things as making leather shoes or writing poetry.

He was also educated by his family in proper manners for those attending a royal event as well as how to dance. These things he learned quickly for he was utterly engaged in the present moment.

On the night of the banquet his family dressed him in fine garments and off they went in their carriage.

The hall was crowded and merry. The royal family, though better dressed than any present, mingled freely with the crowds.

Quite by accident the young man encountered the royal princess, a beauty beyond measure with suitors to match, at least in number.

“Hello, I do not believe that we have met,” the princess was very courteous.

“I have only recently arrived. I must say that I am unused to city life. There is so much wealth that farmers know not of.”

“You were a farmer?”

“For a while. My relatives who live here have given me a place in their home now that my parents have passed on.”

“I am so sorry… where did you live before coming here?”

And so the young man began his tale again and the princess listened with interest, often stopping him to ask questions or make comments, some of which they laughed at together.

After he was done they fell into easy conversation and spent a large portion of the evening together.

After that night the young man was often invited to court and was soon partaking in meetings and representing his prestigious family before the king.

One day, much later in the year, the king summoned him and spoke to him in private.

“You have become a constant companion of my daughter and it would not surprise me in the least if the two of you were to be married. However that is not why I called you here. If my daughter trusts you then I must as well and quite frankly I do not know who else to go to.

“I believe that there is a spy among the members of my court, but I cannot look into this affair myself without alerting the man or woman in question. Therefore I would like to ask you to look for this person for me.”

“Your majesty, it would be my honor.”

The young man wasted no time, but immediately set about the task of finding this spy, this invisible Dark Star among the suns of the courtiers. He made a plan.

In all confidence he took each member of court aside and told them that he was looking for a spy and needed their help. He set up a meeting place and met with that same person in private. He then informed them that they were the spy and that he was apprehending them. On both occasions he noted their reactions with great detail.

Each and every time he let the person go and in the following weeks noticed how they acted, whether they were suspicious of others or relieved.

After he had done this to each and every courtier he knew who it was, the Dark Star, the spy who could blend in almost perfectly.

He reported the man to the king who had him arrested and, once it had been affirmed that their information was no longer being leaked, he was given the princess’s hand in marriage.

Many times in the years to come the young man invited the wandering man who had travelled with him and the man who had employed him on his farm to come to the city and stay with him, but they both refused, both as happy with their lives as he now was with his.

The young man searched for the old man who had taught him to gaze at the stars, but he never found him or his rectangular seeing stone. When he asked for him he was told that there never was such a man.

He married the princess and eventually took over the responsibilities of the king. He and his wife were happy until the end of their days.

Generations later the young man, now long dead, was celebrated as the king whose eyes were keenest in history, for he could read your very thoughts and see the black souls of those who meant him ill.

He had ruled well, always living in the moment and preparing for the future and he always treated his peoples fairly and without bias. He had been a good king, husband and father by all accounts.

Word count: 2499.