The Teachers Rode a Wheel of Fire

Roger Zelazny

When he looked up and saw a moon of blood spinning in the daytime sky he dropped his piece of fruit.

The moon had never come down before. The sun still hung where it belonged. Had one of them given birth to this whirling offspring?

He spat the unchewed pulp from his mouth and stared upward.

It was larger than either parent now, and had lost some of its fire. Distantly, he heard a sound, like the singing of the tiny night-things.

It spun, it wheeled⁠—its last fires vanishing⁠—and the smooth grayness of its sides glistened, like a stone at the bottom of a stream.

It grew until the sky was full of it, and then the spinning ceased. It hung near overhead, where the low-flying birds go.

He hid within a clump of bushes.

As delicately as the purring ones dip their whiskers, it hovered over the open space, then bent the tall grasses downward.

It settled, and the birds grew quiet.

Peering through leaves, he watched as its side sprang open.

Two things walked out, striding down the smooth, gray slope.

They were shaped similarly to himself, and walked upright, as he did. But they were dark, like the trees, with a glistening row of stones up the front of their darkness. Their feet looked black and hard, without toes; their hands were light-colored, and shaped like his.

They breathed deeply and looked about. They stared at his bush.

“He didn’t run away, but he’s afraid to come out?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Guess so.”

The strange noises they made! Like the animals!

“Let’s see if we can interest him.”

They spread something white upon the ground. One of them took a sac-like thing from his middle. He opened it above the whiteness.

Little colored stones, like the eggs of birds, rolled out.

\* \* \*

One of them bent forward and, with a sweeping gesture, picked up one of the stones. He held it high, then slowly brought it down toward his face. He deposited it in his mouth and chewed vigorously. Afterwards, he patted his stomach.

The other one did the same thing.

They were eating!

They looked at his bush again.

His mouth watered. He thought of the sweet fruit he had dropped.

They moved away from the whiteness; they went back to the fallen moon that no longer shone.

Should he? Should he go out and eat one of the colored things? They were so good! They had both patted their stomachs!

He pushed the leaves aside, watching. They were both looking in the other direction.

He moved, placing his feet soundlessly. He approached the whiteness.

They were still looking off in the other direction.

He scooped up a heap of the colored things and ran back to his bush.

He turned and looked back. They had not noticed.

Eagerly, he popped one into his mouth. It was sweet, sweeter than fruit-flesh. He threw all of them into his mouth at once. He noticed then that his moist palm had turned many colors. He licked it. It was sweet too.

He wanted more.

The things looked back at the whiteness. They moved toward it. This time the other one took something from his belt. Little brown squares fell from the sac.

Again, they made a great show of how good they tasted. His mouth watered for more sweetness.

This time, though, they did not go all the way back to the moon. They only went part of the way, then sprawled upon the ground. They were not watching the bush.

Should he try it again? ⁠—they seemed very careless with their treasures.

He stole forth a few feet⁠—they paid no attention.

He picked up a brown square and ate it quickly⁠—they did not notice.

He ate some more.

How good! Better even than the little colored stones!

Gulping, he stuffed more and more into his mouth.

One of them was looking at him, but did not move. He did not seem to care.

Squatting, he ate everything again.

The one who had been watching him took another sac from his middle and tossed it.

He jumped to his feet.

But the sac fell to the whiteness, and the two showed no signs of getting up.

He picked up the sac and tore it open.

More things fell out, all of them good to eat.

He ate them and hurried away into the woods.

\* \* \*

The next day there were other good things for him to eat, spread out upon the whiteness. The two sat on the grass, watching him, occasionally making small noises. But they never attacked him. They never threw stones or tried to hit him. After several days, he grew used to them, and sometimes sat staring back.

How strange they were! Giving away food like that!

Then, along with the food, one day, there was something else.

He studied it.

It was a stone on the end of a stick, held, somehow, by a strip of animal skin.

As he gulped the food, he studied it through the corner of his eye.

The stone was oddly-shaped⁠—thick and heavy on one end, with an edge on the other. It was a good stone. He had never seen one like it.

He picked it up and the stick came with it.

They were watching him very closely.

Why had they put that silly stick onto it? He tugged at, but it resisted his efforts.

When he looked up again, one of them was holding one just like it. It placed a piece of wood on the ground and used the stone on the stick to strike it. Finally, the piece of wood was cut in half.

⁠—Yes! He could see that it was a good stone, he did not have to be shown!

He raised it to his mouth and chewed through the animal skin. He threw the stick away.

A very good stone!

One of them groaned.

“Early tool-destroying stage,” it noised.

“Shut up, Cal,” said the other.

It brandished its own stone high, holding it by the stick. It pointed to the stick.

Did they want the stone back? He decided to pretend he did not really want it.

Casually, he tossed the stone away, throwing it over his shoulder. He was careful to aim it at the clump of bushes, where he could find it later.

Then he went back into the woods.

The next day, a stick, held bent by another strip of hide, lay before him on the whiteness⁠—and many other little pointed sticks, with feathers tied to them.

One of the things stood by the moon, throwing the little sticks with the bent one. He made them stick into a piece of wood hanging from a tree limb.

How stupid to use little pointed sticks⁠—when a thrown stone would smash out brains so much easier!

He ate the food and left the sticks where they lay. He did not touch them.

\* \* \*

The following day there were no more sticks and stones with his food. But the one gray thing kept slapping its breast and pointing to itself, making a noise that sounded like, “Cal.”

The other did the same thing, making the noise, “Dom.”

Perhaps they were possessed, like the holy one who had been dropped on his head as a baby. Thinking of him, he remembered to carry off some of the little brown squares for an offering.

“Let’s give up, Dom. He can’t get the idea of words or tools.”

“I guess you’re right. He’s just not far enough along. Maybe, someday...”

“Sure, we’ll write it up in the report.”

They went back to the fallen moon; the hole in its side closed behind them. After a while the sound began again, and the moon rose above the ground.

It moved to a treetop height.

He hid himself in the bushes.

It began to turn, to spin, moving higher. Softly, the glow began.

It became a bloody moon once more, spinning, turning...

He watched for a long, long while.

Then something happened inside his head.

He looked about the ground and found a flat, round stone. He looked up at the spinning disc, then set the stone on its edge. He gave it a push, and it began to roll.

When it fell, he set it upright and pushed it again.

He looked up and the moon with its gray things was gone.

Then he looked for the straight stick he had thrown away.

When he found it, he looked for another round stone, and the chewed piece of rawhide.

⁠—It might not fall if there were two of them, one fastened to each end...

A Word from Zelazny

The idea for this story “hit me after I’d looked up at the sun for some time for some damfool reason I now forget, and I got a wheel-shaped afterimage. Having just been reading something sfnal, the comparison of a wheel and a flying saucer spinning (and viewed bottomside) struck me.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Notes

Events similar to this 1962 story were later more famously portrayed by the encounter between the black monolith and primitive humans in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

1. Tightbeam #37, 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)